BADGER BOOKS

Civilization staggered before the onslaught of the radio-active giants

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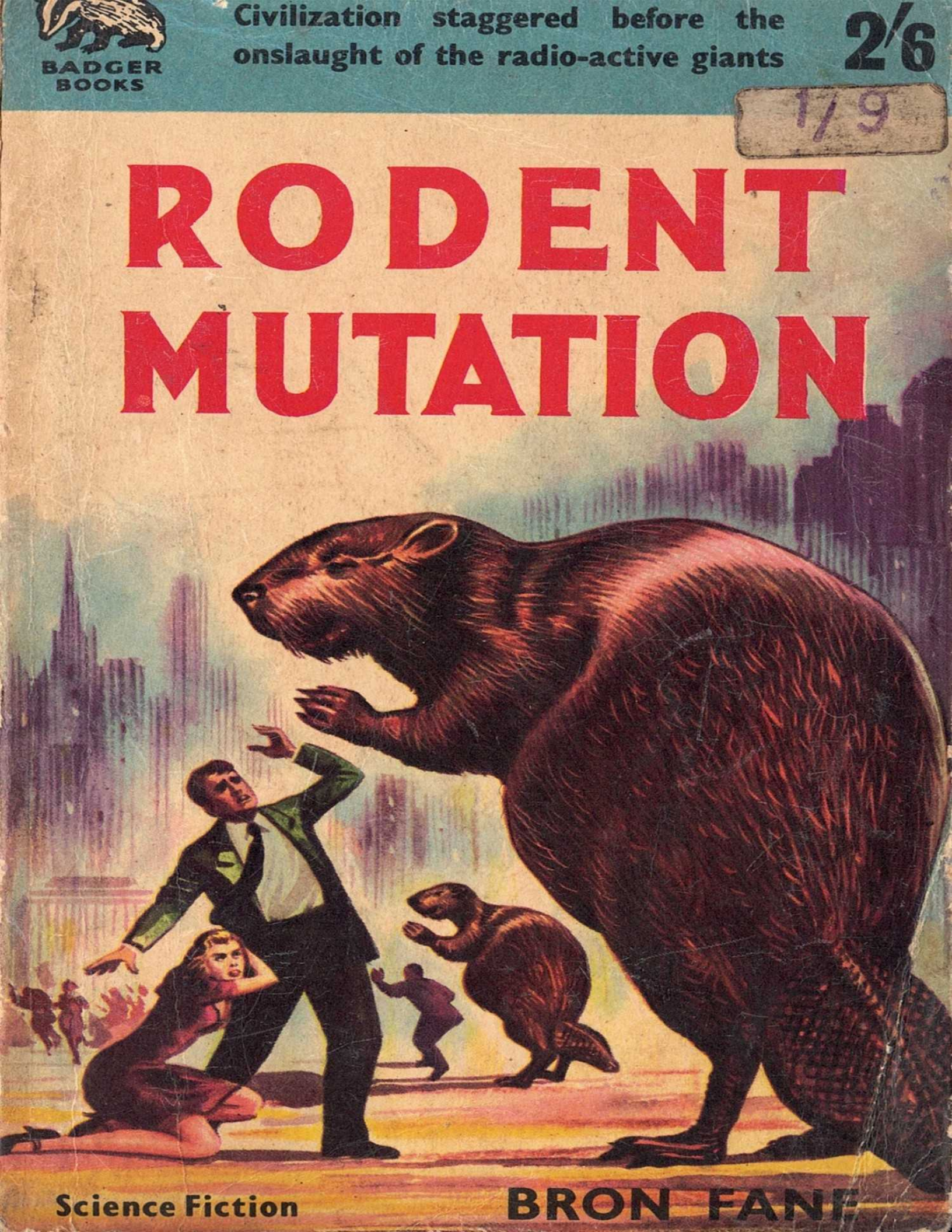
RODENT MUTATION



Science Fiction

BRON FANF

RODENT MUTATION

All characters in this book are fictional and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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RODENT MUTATION

by

BRON FANE

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INTRODUCTION

Man has always polluted Nature. He pours his oil upon the waters; his industrial waste into the rivers and streams; his combustion and smoke into the air.

Life is a very equitable process, it pays dividends according to man's investments. "What a man—or a nation—soweth, that they shall also reap." Man sowed corruption into the the waters. Fish died of the poison, nothing lived except mould, water rats, and a few incredibly hardy beavers. Then it wasn't only poison; *it was radio-activity being swirled into the dark waters.*

Slowly the beavers and the water rats began to change. Generations of the rodents bred and mutated as a result of the toxins and the radio-active waste.

At last they emerged! Huge. Hideous. Horrible. Thirsting for vengeance. Man's mastery of the world was threatened.

The radio-activity had done more than increase the size of the rodents. It had given them *power*. Terrifying, undreamt-of, alien power. No cages could hold beasts that possessed the power of teleportation in their mutated minds.

CHAPTER ONE
Pollution

BARNEY COLRAYN was a singularly ordinary type of individual. He had a humdrum, prosaic, mundane job. He was, of all unromantic things, a Sanitary Inspector. He had had an undistinguished and rather secure life history. Prep-school, grammar school, University, degree in Sanitary Engineering, comfortable post in local Government service... And at thirty he was a middle-aged, nondescript, quiet nonentity; and yet, whatever his faults might be, Barney Colrayn was thorough. He was painstaking and efficient, and he gave his meagre best to his job. If he considered that any particular thing was a menace to the health and well-being of the community, he would leave no stone unturned, no manhole cover unlifted; no drain un-disinfected until he had eliminated the obnoxiousness.

He was not a man to be trifled with. He was a stickler for accuracy, and he stuck to the letter of the law. Big firm or small, private individual or enormous combine, they could all expect the same treatment from Barney Colrayn. He was of medium height, he was of medium build, he had a singularly ordinary appearance, and yet despite any noticeable vigour, he had a quiet, efficient way of getting things done. Barney was a good all-rounder, and he tackled an unsavoury job with quiet confidence.

He opened his large, meticulously neat, desk diary and examined his day's round. His first stop he saw, with a slightly weary sigh, was Jasper Leroy Inc. He had called on Jasper Leroy Inc. since what seemed to him time immemorial, or time-out-of-mind. He was heartily sick and tired of Jasper Leroy and all his minions and associates. For the Leroy Inc. was an octopus-like industry that had only one aim and only one purpose—to increase the already over-stuffed banking account of one Jasper Leroy, himself!

Barney passed the diary across to his secretary, dealt with his correspondence, donned his neat unostentatious hat and coat, picked up his brief-case, and walked from his office to the garage round the corner. His small, two-year-old 8 h.p. car was as quiet and unostentatious as his overcoat, his hat, his brief-case, and everything about him.

He was just a quiet man, in a quiet car, doing a quiet job, with quiet efficiency; and beneath that veneer of ordinary respectability and quiet confidence, Barney Colrayn was annoyed...

He never allowed his annoyance to show, but he was annoyed, none the less. He was annoyed with Leroy Inc. He was annoyed in particular-as far as he ever allowed himself to personify his annoyance—with Jasper himself. Jasper, he reflected, was the antithesis of everything he stood for, but then Jasper was just one of the calls on his round and had to be dealt with.

Whether it was an offensive dustbin in a back alley of an area due for slum clearance, or whether it was the wholesale pollution of the river, that Leroy Inc. flagrantly carried out, it was all the same to Barney. It had to be done. He drove quietly, thoughtfully and carefully, observing the highway code as though it was some sacred manual, for in thirteen years Barney had never had even the slightest suggestion of an accident. He was one of the people who believed that accidents are *caused*—he didn't believe that they just *happened*. He always took particular pains not to cause one, or to be involved, if it were humanly possible, in an accident of someone else's causing. He tried to anticipate the actions of other road users as far as lay within his ability, for he was by no means psychic—and he had met with a modicum of success, at any rate in this respect.

He parked his rather ordinary looking little motor between two gigantic, gleaming Chevrolets, and left it with its back towards Jasper's gigantic Rolls: a beautiful, gleaming, luxurious palace on wheels. It seemed too good a car—far too good a car—for a man like Jasper Leroy. But whatever his other faults, Leroy had impeccable taste in cars. It compensated for his criminal taste in clothing.

It was typical of Leroy to be as inaccessible and as awkward as possible when the Sanitary Inspector called; and Barney was faced with a series of ten-minute waits as he was jostled from one secretary to another. He was shunted from one subordinate office to another until, finally, after most of his morning had been wasted, he got to the outer sanctum which contained Leroy's secretary. He sat quietly smoking, and thinking over the details of the protest he was going to have to make. Leroy, he decided, had reached the end of his rope, and it was about time somebody started putting on some legal brakes.

He was a trifle diffident about the coming interview. Not that he was in any way afraid of Leroy, for he represented a far larger organization in the shape of the local County Council, but all the same Leroy could be—and always had been—an awkward and unpleasant customer to tackle... Finally the buzzer rang, and Leroy's harsh voice crashed over the inter-communication set.

"I'm free now for five minutes!" he grated. "Colrayn can come in." His voice died away as the secretary switched off the intercom. She rose and walked in a slinky, sleek manner across the deep pile carpet of the outer office, tapped respectfully on the door and waited for Leroy's bellow of: "Come on in!" The door shook as his voice died away in the corners of his office. The Sanitary Inspector thanked the secretary with rather a curt nod and stepped swiftly into Leroy's office.

It was garishly furnished. There were coloured neons all over the place. It simply bristled with chromium plated handles. Handles on filing cabinets, handles on desks, handles on doors, handles on drawers, handles practically everywhere. Leroy waved Colrayn to the least-inviting looking of an array of singularly uncomfortable chairs, that had an ultra-modern, gleaming, contemporary look, but were the very devil to sit on! Colrayn balanced himself on the edge of one and sat up very straight.

"What do you want? Make it snappy! I'm busy!" Typical, thought Colrayn, typical. No 'Good morning' no *politesse*.

He was annoyed at the thinly-veiled contempt, the thinly-veiled superficiality of the tycoon's creating. He did not like Jasper Leroy. The more he saw of him the less he liked him.

"Very well, I'll come straight to the point," said the Sanitary Inspector. "It's the matter of river pollution again!"

"Again!" said Leroy sarcastically. "You know, you'd think these damn Councils had better things to do!" His beady, piggy little eyes bored into Colrayn, but the Sanitary Inspector returned the gaze with a singularly aloof stare. And it was Jasper Leroy, puffing at his fat cigar, who lowered his gaze first. He blew smoke rings vulgarly towards Barney.

"All right, shoot! What's wrong with the river? What am I supposed to be doing now? Poisoning all the dear little fishy-wishies?"

"Sarcasm," said Colrayn mildly, "is regarded as one of the lower forms of wit."

Jasper Leroy suddenly sat up straight as though he had been touched with the tip of a whip.

"You getting out of your place, sonny?"

"I'm just reminding you that I like a little civil courtesy, as I believe I'm entitled to," said the Sanitary Inspector coldly. "We are not here to discuss personalities, Mr. Leroy, I have come to put in an official request to you on behalf of my Council and the River Board, by whom I am jointly employed, to stop this pollution of the river immediately. I could, of course, give you the figures, but I don't suppose you want to hear them."

"No, I don't! I'm not interested. I got a factory. I got twenty big factories and they all throw out waste products. Give it a fancy name, call it 'Factory effluence' call it any other name. To me it's just muck! I've got to get rid of it. I've got to get rid of it in liquid. There's a river flowing past. O.K. What am I supposed to do with it if I don't pump it into the river?"

"I'm afraid your disposal problem is entirely for you, yourself. If you like to consult me privately in a professional capacity I should be

very pleased to give you my advice on the problem. However, I am not in your employ, and I am not going to give you a consultation gratis. I'm afraid our personal relationships are not as strong as they might be."

"Oh, so you've come to give the ultimatum, have you?" said Leroy. "Well, you can stick this up your weskit and tell your fat, greasy Councillors to stick it up their weskits as well. I have to get rid of waste. I want to get rid of it in the cheapest possible way. There's a river running by, that's why I built the factory here. Men with factories have been throwing rubbish into that river for years—ever since the Industrial Revolution—am I right?"

"Unfortunately, yes," answered Colrayn. "But now the more enlightened Government measures-for we are no longer living in the 19th century, Mr. Leroy-have decreed that you may no longer deposit rubbish in the river *ad libidum.*"

"Ad what?" asked Leroy.

"*Ad libidum* is a Latin phrase meaning 'freely' or 'as you will'," replied Colrayn coldly.

"Ah, so you're throwing education back in me teeth, are you?" said Leroy, chewing on his fat cigar, "well, let me tell you this, Mr. God-Almighty-Sanitary-Inspector, and you can tell your Council this from Jasper Leroy, they'll have to get Court Injunctions before they can stop me."

"A Court Injunction is not impossible to obtain, I would remind you," said Barney Colrayn with an edge of ice to his voice.

"No, but it's expensive, and takes a long time," answered Leroy.

There was a silence during which the two men looked at each other.

'Damned bureaucrat,' thought Leroy savagely, and wishing it had been Colrayn's windpipe which he was biting.

The Sanitary Inspector thought 'Vulgar, self-made, half-wit, one-track mind, callous, anti-social. What a man to deal with!'

It was Leroy's rich, fruity, echoing laugh which terminated the silence. Jasper was an enormously fat man and that laugh rumbled up from the depths of his three-tiered stomach.

"You've given me your ultimatum, sonny boy! Now I'll give you mine. I refuse to stop, is that clear? But I tell you what I will do, if it will stop you pestering me. I'll consider—mind you, I only say consider—dumping ten per-cent less. Tell 'em I'll cut down my effluent by ten per-cent."

Colrayn shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said, "but it must stop one hundred per cent! We do not want any more factory effluent in this section of river!"

"Well, you just tell me how the hell I am to get rid of it," stormed Leroy.

"That, I'm afraid," said Barney Colrayn, with just a trace of primness, "is your problem! I have delivered my ultimatum and you have expressed your intention of not complying with it. Good morning to you, Mr. Leroy."

"Hey, wait a minute," said Jasper, "wait a minute! Look, can't we talk this over?"

"I don't think there is anything more to be said," remarked the Sanitary Inspector, "good morning, Mr. Leroy." And with that he walked out, rather more briskly than he had walked in.

"Well, I'm damned," exploded Leroy. "Of all the jumped up little jackanapes. He'll be telling me what I can and what I can't put in my dustbin next!"

Colrayn's head reappeared round the door. "There are already regulations governing household refuse. Certain articles are not acceptable to the Sanitary operatives! I am just as keen about matters like that as I am about the pollution of the river by your factory. So I advise you to be very careful what you put in your dustbin." That wasn't wise, he told himself, yet he couldn't help it. He disliked Leroy intensely. The fat, loud, vulgar cigar smoking tycoon got under his skin in a way that few other men did.

He got back into his car and drove round the largest of the Leroy factories to inspect the river. The mammoth combine produced a vast conglomeration of articles, among them various pieces of equipment that threw off radio active waste. There were toxins, poisons of various kinds; harsh, destructive chemicals, and above all the radio-activity.

The Sanitary Inspector took a small geiger counter from the boot of his car and began checking the river surfaces. There was sufficient radiation to make the counter begin clicking.

It was with a worried frown that he drove back to his office.

He turned to his secretary rather sadly.

"I'm afraid we shall have to bring proceedings against the Leroy company," he said. "Will you type out the necessary memo to the Council?"

"Oh, yes, of course, sir."

"He refuses to stop dumping that wretched radio-active waste," went on the Inspector.

"How annoying, sir," answered the secretary.

"Very annoying indeed," agreed Barney. "You are a very sympathetic colleague, Miss Johnson. It is nice to know you regard our work as a crusade, rather than a bureaucratic time filler. I'm afraid that's how some people regard it."

"I think cleanliness is next to Godliness, sir," she replied. "As the proverb says." And she went off to type the memo.

"It's been going on for years," muttered Barney, half to himself, half to the open book in front of him. "Going on for years. Poison, dirt, effluent, and, worst of all, the radio activity. Heaven knows what's happening in that river to the life—if there is any left."

"Did you call, sir?" asked his secretary.

"No, no, I didn't," Colrayn shook his head. "I'm afraid I was talking to myself about Mr. Leroy's river pollution. It has annoyed me rather."

"I consider it's absolutely criminal," rejoined the secretary.

Colrayn smiled. "So do I, confidentially," he agreed. "However, it'll be dealt with. Leroy may be big, but the Council is bigger, and I don't think he pulls that many strings. He might be able to wriggle one or two of them, but 99 per cent of the Council are as straight as guns. They won't stand for any hanky-panky from Jasper Leroy... Going on for years," he repeated rather absently, "that's what worries me. I can't help wondering if anything strange is going on. You know life is like that river, Miss Johnson. We get out of it what we put into it. We've been sowing pollution and corruption into that river until we've made it into a kind of industrial cesspool, and it sometimes makes me break into a cold sweat when I wonder what may be lurking there, beneath that dark surface. But there, I'm getting poetic and fanciful, and that won't do at all, especially in a job like this. Whoever heard of a poetic Sanitary Inspector!"

He sat back in his swivel chair, his glasses poised between finger and thumb. His eyes half closed in a mood of intense concentration.

"It's been going on for years," he whispered to himself, "I wonder... Oh, how I *wonder*!"

CHAPTER TWO
Disappearing Trick

THE Nationals got hold of the story almost as soon as the locals. 'Murder', 'Suspected Murder' or 'Disappearance in Uncanny Circumstances'. All these things have a glorious news value, and the hounds of Fleet Street descend in baying hordes to savour the morsel to the full.

They had descended upon the vicinity of the Leroy factory. They were trampling upon the same ground, and upon the same river path that the Police search party had covered two days before. Ricky O'Jordon had disappeared. That in itself was not a particularly remarkable fact, for the O'Jordons were a family of Irish labourers. They boasted of nine children and a none-too-large cottage. Paddy O'Jordon, the paterfamilias of this gloriously happy-go-lucky tribe, was a burly, raw-boned, six-foot Celt, with Gaelic temperament and bluff Irish good humour. The kids were being brought up in a pretty rough school by many of the modern social lights, but they could have had it a lot worse. The O'Jordons were a wild set, if not by any means a bad one, but their father was as concerned about his nine little terrors as any other parent would be.

He came back from his day's navvying on the day of the disappearance to find that little Lucy O'Jordon was in an unusual state of nerves, bordering in fact on hysteria, for she was one of those placid matrons who usually took things in her stride. Nature and circumstances had made her a homespun philosopher, and she normally managed to cope with all the vicissitudes of life with the attitude of 'if things will happen—let 'em'. But a little 'un had disappeared, and after a frantic search and a call on a dozen neighbours they could find no trace of him anywhere.

Little Ricky was one of those round children who tend to bounce through life. He had inherited a wildly reckless sense of adventure from his father, and his Irish blood led him to see no fear

of any creature, living or dead. No situation, no matter how dangerous it might be, was any-thing other than merely exciting to little Ricky. But it was long past tea-time, and no matter how strongly his sense of adventure might be developed his hunger was usually a very efficient, natural clock…

The O'Jordons had telephoned the school, a sympathetic head-master and a concerned form-master had instituted a quick search of the premises, which had resulted in a confirmation of their original assertion that Rick was not there.

The police were called in, and several of the lads in the neighbourhood with whom he usually walked home said they remembered seeing him last, armed with bent pin and twig from the hedge, disappearing in the direction of the river.

The river was dragged. No body. The footpath was searched for footprints, a set were found at the edge, and an astute sergeant reconstructed from the marks that young O'Jordon had been fishing from a spot that was favoured by the local lads, though an experienced angler would not have given it a second look. Only the most repulsive of the mud-fish could have lived in that toxic water.

More boys were questioned. Nobody had been near the spot, and nobody had been near the scene when it happened. There were no marks that the lad had slipped in, been pushed in, or fallen in. There were no footprints coming away from the river. He had simply walked down to the water's edge and *disappeared*. It was a singularly *strange* business.

The sergeant was talking to a senior constable about it, even as reporters jostled around the spot, flashing cameras at the bleak, dirty water.

"Reminds me almost of that Benjamin Bathurst business," said the sergeant dourly.

"Oh, what was that, sarge?" asked the senior constable.

"That was a queer disappearance in the early 19th century. Let me see if I can just remember the facts now," said the police-sergeant. "It was on the 25th November, 1809. Ben Bathurst was a

diplomat who had been representing Britain at Vienna. This was during the Napoleonic wars, he was returning to Britain through Germany when, at the little town of Perleberg, in the presence of his valet and his secretary he was examining the horses that were to pull his coach. Under their observation he walked around to the other side of the horses, and as he turned the corner, bingo! he just disappeared. He walked around the horses and he was never seen again."

"Cor, stone the crows," said the constable, "that was a puzzler. Pity Sherlock Holmes wasn't on the go a few years earlier! I bet he'd have found him!"

"Yes, it was a queer business altogether, and this one's every bit as queer. I suppose the rational explanation is that the poor kid slipped in. But I don't like it, I don't like it one little bit."

Seth Barton joined them. Seth Barton was a local 'character.' He dressed deplorably, washed infrequently, and was generally a thorough nuisance. He was a kind of riverside beachcomber as much as he was anything. Whatever oddments he happened to find he turned into coppers at the local scrapyard, and bought beer... On the strength of the beer he went out and looked for more rubbish. The more beer he had consumed the less rubbish he found. On more than one occasion he had been hauled out of the river in a semi-drowned condition, swearing that he would sign the pledge. The following day he was staggering along the path again, looking for bits and pieces.

As he lurched across to the sergeant, that worthy shrugged his shoulders in mock resignation.

"Can you spare me a minute?" said the old man.

"I suppose so," said the sergeant. "The Tower of London isn't on fire, and nobody's pinched the Crown Jewels so I expect my services can be at your disposal—but no more than a minute! What's the matter, Seth?"

"Well, I've seen something that might have something to do with that boy—you know, the little kid what's disappeared."

"If you're pulling my leg, I'll put you inside for a fortnight," said the sergeant grimly.

"I'm not," said the old man. "Honest to God, I'm not. Will you come and have a look? I know I'm drunk but this might be important —honest. I'm not that bleedin' drunk!" It was not like Seth to be so insistent, so the sergeant went with him along the opposite bank from the reporters.

"Look!" said Seth, and lifted up a square of plywood, which he had thrown down to cover a *singularly remarkable footprint*.

"Good God!" said the sergeant and knelt to examine it. It was 18 inches across and the exact replica of an animal's paw. It was as though some gigantic beast had steadied itself on the bank while it raised its head out of the water…

CHAPTER THREE
Send for Sinclair

EDWARD SINCLAIR was a tall, broad-shouldered, debonair character. He had the lazy swashbuckling gait of a modern Robin Hood. He was a devil-may-care adventurer who filled in his income tax returns under the heading 'Special Agent and Private Investigator.'

There was in fact, little or nothing that Edward Sinclair would not handle, provided in the first place that it was honest ,and in the second that it was exciting. Edward had a rather broad definition of that which is honest. To him the exact *letter* of the law was far less important than its *spirit*. He had a broad ethical basis, and a strong concept of what was morally right and what was definitely wrong. But he saw life in several shades of grey as well as strict tones of black and white, and if he found it necessary—as he did on occasion—to contravene the letter of the law in order to keep its spirit, then he had not the slightest hesitation in doing so, and it was this very ability of his, to skate on thin ice, that had achieved him some spectacular results as a private investigator.

Not for him the sordid days and nights of following unfaithful partners in boring divorce cases.

That was not his idea of being a Special Investigator. Edward was far more interested in the unsolved murder, or the undetectable jewel thief. Anything that smacked of vice—and above all drugs—would receive his extra special attention. He hated and detested these things, with the other end, a really powerful detestation.

He had made many friends in many unusual places and unusual occupations, and it was a long time since he had seen his old school friend Barney Colrayn; so when the telephone jarred shrilly, interrupting his brilliantly rendered Mozart, he replaced the lid of his grand with a slightly irritated gesture and picked up the receiver.

"Edward Sinclair speaking." His voice was cool and clear, yet at the same time powerful and deep.

"I don't know if you remember me," said the voice "but this is Barney Colrayn. We were at school together."

"Good heavens, yes! Of course I do! You're the chap who scooped up all the science prizes; didn't you used to like playing about with microbes and things?"

"That's right. You flatter me, Mr. Sinclair."

"Oh, cut out the 'Mr.' Eddy to you, Barney! It always has been, always will be. Don't let my notoriety put any barriers between our boyhood friendship!"

"Thanks a lot," said Barney. "I'll get straight to the point, I know you must be pretty busy."

"No, I'm not. As a matter of fact, I was just bashing hell out of the piano when you rang. I'm never too busy to hear from an old pal. Must have been almost fifteen years since I saw you!"

"Must have been," said Barney. "But I won't bore you with a lot of reminiscence—although there are plenty we could go into."

"There certainly are! Those were the days, eh? Happiest days of your life, and all that sort of thing, eh?"

"Oh, I don't know, I've been quite happy since! And I've never trembled quite so much as I did when the Old Man used to get me on the study carpet."

"Bit of a Tartar, wasn't he? Wonder where the old boy is now?"

"Oh, I think he got promoted. It was all the experience he had in dealing with rips like us," said Colrayn. "Got a headship somewhere in one of those ultra-modern glass palaces that they call schools nowadays."

"Oh, good for him," said the private investigator, "but you were saying, old boy—?"

"I was wondering, whether or not you'd been reading the stories of the disappearance of a kid called Rick O'Jordon."

"Oh, yes! The little lad who was fishing by the side of a river and just disappeared."

"Well, I'm indirectly involved," said Colrayn.

"Oh, how's that?"

"I'm the local Sanitary Inspector," said Colrayn., "Of all the unromantic jobs!" It was all Sinclair could do to suppress a laugh.

"Honest?" He asked incredulously.

"Ghastly, isn't it? I hate telling people what I do! I believe they think Sanitary Inspectors are little fat men in bowler hats who go around sticking test tubes down drains!"

"Aren't they?" said Sinclair.

"Well, I haven't quite got to that stage, but I suppose I shall by the time I'm fifty," quipped Barney. "But to cut a long story short, Eddy. There's a fellow down here named Leroy——"

"Ah, *Jasper* Leroy. One of those men who stick dirty factories up everywhere, and make fantastic profits!"

"I see you've got your ear to the ground," said the Sanitary Inspector.

"My ear and your nose! What a combination." This time the investigator permitted himself a chuckle. The Sanitary Inspector laughed too.

"Well, I had occasion to call on this Jasper Leroy the other day, and he's a pretty unsavoury bird, even for a Sanitary Inspector to deal with. Big, fat, flashily-dressed, cigar-smoking, self-made tycoon."

"I know the type exactly and detest it!" said Sinclair. "Well, what happens? Was he bubbling too much effluent into the town's water supply?"

"Not quite," replied Colrayn, "but he was fouling up the river a bit, and it was more serious than factory garbage, it was *radio-active waste*."

"That's a bit thick."

"The point is, that this river, which he's been pouring his horrible pollution into for years, is the same one that the kid was fishing in, when he disappeared. I've probably got a bee in my bonnet about this thing, but I don't like radio-activity, even in minor doses. I think it has dangerous side effects that we have only begun to guess at yet. He'd been doing this a long time, and I went round and threatened legal proceedings two or three days ago." He hesitated rather uncertainly.

"Go on," said Eddy, "I'm beginning to get interested."

"Well, as I was saying, I've got some pretty queer notions about radio-active side effects. But this kid's disappearance is a complete and utter mystery. There has been a very strange development since then—I'm sorry I'm telling this story in jerks and snatches, old boy."

"It's O.K." said Eddie. "I have a special genius and flair for this sort of thing…"

"——On the opposite bank a very strange mark has been found. It is a mark about 18 inches across and it looked—I only say 'looked'—like the footprint of some gigantic animal. If you could imagine a dog sixty or eighty feet high, or a beaver or a badger. It looked like the footprint of a rodent. A gigantic rodent, and there was only this one. Mind you, someone could have gone along there and made the thing with a trowel, and made it look pretty genuine. But it has caused a bit of furore, as you can imagine. Now the rumours are spreading, left, right and centre, that some monster came out of the river and grabbed the kid. You can imagine how rumours like that would get around the town, even among pretty old-fashioned materialists.

"Yes, I certainly can," said the investigator. "This has the smackings of a Loch Ness Monster mystery; it sounds right up my street. You're ringing me to see if I'm interested, are you?"

"That's about the long and short of it," admitted Colrayn.

"Well, you can bet your bottom dollar I'm interested." said Eddy Sinclair. "I'm more than interested, I'm *fascinated*. Now look,

can you put me up for a day or two?"

"Delighted to, if you'll deign to stay at my peasant's cottage after the magnificence of your Mayfair flat."

"Oh, cut out the flannel," retorted Sinclair. "Don't let the Mayfair flat fool you, old boy. I spend up to the hilt, on principle. I could do with another good case. By the way, any chance of getting expenses out of anybody."

"I don't know if I could persuade the Council to take you on, the kid's parents haven't got any money..."

"That's beside the point—if I can find the kid that's all I'm interested in! If we can wheedle any expenses out of some bloated local authority..." he laughed again, "I won't say 'no.' Anyway I'll come over and see if I can dig anything up."

"Remarkably good of you," said Barney. "Expect you when I see you, then?"

"Yes, and that'll be pretty soon," said the investigator. He put the phone down, walked back to his grand, and finished his music. He closed the lid again, and patted it affectionately. He left word with his valet that he was heading north-east, didn't know when he'd be back, and that he would ring daily in case anything important turned up.

Eddy's valet was used to this sort of thing, for Eddy Sinclair was a bird of passage.

He merely smiled, said: "Very good, sir," and packed his case. Eddy walked down to his garage, and got his magnificent saloon. It was big, broad, fast, tremendously powerful. He had done things to the engine that would have baffled most mechanics. He had installed batteries of carburetters and the cylinder head was in such a state of super polish that, like the Gorgon of old, it almost defied being looked at. What would have been a four or five hour drive for anybody else Sinclair accomplished in a third of the time.

When Barney Colrayn opened his door in response to the investigator's knock, and saw who it was standing on his doorstep,

his eyes opened and his jaw dropped as though he had seen a ghost.

"Can't be," he said, "I rang you less than two hours ago! It's over a hundred miles!"

"So?" said Sinclair with a wicked, devil-may-care twinkle, "I got a car, me boy, no scrap heap on wheels! Have you seen the Sinclair special?" He patted the gleaming bonnet. "All that thing needs is a pair of wings and it would take off!"

"I should imagine you have taken off once or twice on the way over. Stone the crows, and me and my modest little 8 h.p. production job, eh? Some people have all the luck!"

"I dunno! I think I'd like to be a Sanitary Inspector! It must be awfully secure!"

"It is," said Colrayn, "as long as there are people, there will be dirt and germs."

"I see it's left its mark on you—it's made you cynical my boy!"

"Cynicism is a barrier against the unpleasant," said Colrayn, "and believe me, in a job like this you need some barriers!"

Sinclair was looking at his watch.

"Do you feel like taking me down to this horrible river?"

"What, *now*?" asked Barney.

"Ah, there lies the difference between us. *Do it now!* That's my motto. Never put off till to-morrow what you can do to-day. Never put off for a minute what you can do at once. I've got some lamps in the car, miniature search lights and all that sort of caper. Eddy Sinclair is nothing if not well equipped. Come on, Lead on Macduff, and let who will be clever—to mix up the sayings of the immortal Bard. They always sound better mixed up!"

"I'm beginning to believe some of the things I've heard about you, already," said Colrayn.

"Well, don't believe too many of them. The best ones aren't true!" Again that devil-may-care smile from the special Investigator.

"Come on, let's have a look-see."

Colrayn directed him down towards the river, and the two men walked along the old, disused towpath to the spot where a hastily erected railing protected the mysterious footprint. It was under police guard and tarpaulin.

The constable looked up from underneath the rim of his helmet. "Who's that?" he asked truculently.

"Its me—Colrayn," answered the Sanitary Inspector.

"Oh, Mr.' Colrayn. Sorry, sir, I didn't recognise you in the darkness, what brings you here this time of night?"

"Just revisiting the scene of the crime," said Sinclair.

"I don't think this is any occasion for levity, sir," said the constable. "We are probably investigating a murder!"

"How jolly," said Eddy. "I've done several, it's my hobby you know."

The policeman's jaw dropped, for in the light of the torches they carried, he had suddenly recognised Eddy Sinclair.

"It can't be," he whispered, "Are you really Eddy Sinclair, sir?"

"I have that doubtful privilege," said the investigator, "why the doleful expression, officer? Surely my fame hasn't spread to Her Majesty's Police Force?"

"You're the bane of our lives, sir," said the constable with a grin, "Didn't you know there was a long article about you in last month's Police Review?"

"What's the reward?" asked Sinclair, with another wicked grin.

"I don't know, sir, but I wouldn't like to try and claim it, if what I've heard about you is true!"

"It's all lies," said Sinclair in mock alarm, "I'm innocent! It was three other men! And a jumping bean!"

Even the stalwart custodian of the law could scarce forbear to smile. Sinclair's humour was infectious, it illumined the grimness of the situation like a flash of brilliant, heaven-sent light.

"Do you think I could take a look at this ghastly foot-print that you're so proudly guarding?" asked the Private Investigator.

"Of course you can, Mr. Sinclair. I reckon that, next to the Chief Commissioner there's nobody I'd sooner let past." He undid the railing fastening and Sinclair moved through. The constable proudly withdrew the tarpaulin as though he were unveiling a new Epstein sculpture. Sinclair whistled.

"Stars and stripes! I shouldn't like to meet that brute on a dark night!"

"You think it is a real footprint then, sir—not a hoax?"

"I most definitely do. Have you taken a plaster cast yet?" asked the investigator.

"Barney, be a good chap and slip back to the car, you'll find some plaster cast mixing material in the back..." Barney returned with the required quick-set, a rubber mixing bowl, a petrol can full of water, and a spatula. With swift, dexterous fingers, Sinclair mixed it up to the required strength; carefully, with a skill born of long practice, he poured the mixture into the strange footprint in the earth. He looked at his watch carefully, and paused to light a cigarette.

"About three minutes and we shall be able to prize that out of there. I use a salted, quick-set mixture."

"Very interesting, sir," said the constable. He looked rather anxiously at the white splodge covering the 'clue'.

"You're sure that won't damage the footprint, sir? I wouldn't like to take responsibility if that was damaged."

"You won't know it's been done, I assure you," said Sinclair. The constable heaved a sigh of relief.

"Oh, that's O.K. then, sir." Sinclair finished his cigarette and tapped the plaster experimentally. "Like the Rock of Gibraltar!" he grinned, "only a slightly different colour and no monkeys! Up she comes!"

Skilfully he pulled the plaster loose. As he had promised, the imprint in the earth was completely undamaged In his hand he held a white model of the monstrous foot. The casting was so good that even the hair lines were showing here and there between the

gigantic toes. The hair was nearly as coarse as thin twine. If there had been any doubt about the footprint, there could be very little doubt about this. It was a hideous thing!

"On a reconstruction in a natural history museum," remarked Sinclair, "this thing wouldn't cause me a second glance, especially if someone had tagged a nice long, Latin name on it, but look at this. Here we are in a quiet, semi-industrialised eastern area. A placid river, mundane, ordinary, every-day in the extreme—what a place to find a foot-print like this!"

"Like the footprints of Satan!" said the constable. His voice was an exclamation.

"They are indeed," replied Sinclair. "You've said a mouthful, pal! I don't think there's much more we can do for the moment. I'll take this back to the car. Thank you very much for your co-operation, officer, it was very nice of you."

"It was a pleasure, sir."

Sinclair and Colrayn walked back to the detective's powerful automobile. As he was putting the plaster cast in the car a sudden inspiration struck the investigator.

"Just hand me that box, there, will you Barney?"

Colrayn handed over a neat, polished, wooden case, about six inches square.

"This is the Sinclair portable geiger counter," smiled Edward, and even as he took it out of its case it began to tick.

"Stone the crows!" he whispered. "Even the plaster has picked it up." He ran it over the cast. "Well below danger level, but I don't like it."

They hurried back to the river bank.

"Who's that?" demanded the constable suspiciously.

"It's me again—Sinclair," replied the investigator. "Can you let me through please? It's important…"

"Of course, sir!" Rather laboriously the constable unfastened the railing for a second time. Colrayn and Sinclair hurried through.

The detective knelt on the damp ground by the side of the gigantic footprint, and ran the geiger counter over it. The clicking was loud and clear. The constable took a pace back.

"Good lord, sir. Is that thing radio-active?"

"It is," answered Edward. "How long have you been here?"

"Bout an hour and a half, sir."

"You haven't run any serious risk then, but I should get well over to the other side of these railings now..."

"You bet!" asserted the constable. "Don't fancy monkeying about with that stuff."

Sinclair looked at Colrayn, and Colrayn looked at Sinclair.

"What's the next move?" he asked.

Sinclair put his geiger counter back in its carefully padded case and stepped out of the enclosure.

"I'd like to interview Jasper Leroy," he said,

"He's an awkward customer to get to," answered Colrayn. "You have to go through fifteen secretaries, and he keeps you waiting, on principle."

"Give me ten seconds on the phone with him, and I bet he'll see me," said Edward. His eyes were glinting. "I have a way with awkward customers like Jasper." The light of devil-may-care battle was gleaming in his eyes.

"Do you think I ought to go back to the station and make a report on this?" asked the constable.

"I think you'd better stay here and keep everybody away from it. We'll drop in at the station and let the sergeant know, as we go past."

"Thank you very much, sir. What do you consider a safe distance?"

"Ten to fifteen yards, at least. As long as you can remain close enough to see that nobody else is going to come walking up to it, I should get as far away as you can."

"Right, sir. I'll do that," replied the stalwart custodian of the law.

Sinclair and Colrayn hurried back to the car.

"This is a turn-up for the book," remarked the investigator.

They sped back to the town itself and called in at the Station. Sinclair delivered his news to an astonished sergeant.

"We ought to call in the Atomic Energy Commission, do you mean sir—get somebody down to have a look at the thing?"

"Well, certainly keep that area well clear, and if you can, get somebody down to test the river water."

"Good idea," agreed the sergeant. "Thank you for letting us know."

"Pleasure," answered Sinclair.

Then they were driving back to Colrayn's flat. When they arrived the first thing Edward did was to make for the phone. He was a human dynamo. A bundle of energy and power. He was all drive, and push, and go. There was nothing he couldn't accomplish when he set his mind to it. He dialled Jasper Leroy's number and waited, while the phone purred intermittently in his ear. There was a click as someone lifted the receiver at the other end, and Edward Sinclair gave his friend Barney a quick thumbs up sign.

CHAPTER FOUR
Battle of the Giants

"THIS is Mr. Leroy's valet speaking," came a rather affected voice over the wire.

There were many things which Sinclair disliked, more than anything else he disliked affectation, next to that ostentation. Jasper Leroy's valet literally reeked of both. Sinclair took an immediate dislike to the voice.

"Tell Jasper I want to speak to him, at once," he said sharply.

"Er—I beg your pardon?" The valet was taken off guard, the affectation dropped from his voice, like a mask, like a cloak.

"Tell him it's urgent, and hurry up! I haven't got all night."

"I am not accustomed to being addressed in that tone of voice," retorted the valet. "I must know who's calling. I cannot trouble Mr. Leroy for some trifling matter."

"Just get him to the phone, and don't waste my time."

"Well, I never!" said the valet, and hung up.

"Blast!" said Sinclair. He rang the number again. It was a long time before the valet answered.

"Mr. Leroy's residence, Mr. Leroy's valet speaking." The oil just oozed out of his voice.

"Tell Leroy that Edward Sinclair is on the phone. Tell him that if he doesn't answer I'm coming over to see him! And I don't take 'No' for an answer."

"I will inform Mr. Leroy that you are calling," said the valet, "but I doubt very much whether he will be interested in speaking to you."

They heard his voice from a distance, "Sir, there is a person on the phone, that gives his name as Sinclair. Shall I say that you are out?" "What's he want?" They could hear Jasper's harsh shout in the

background. Eddy was smiling to himself, at the mumbled, distant conversation just out of reach of the receiver.

"I'd like to know what the blighters are muttering about," he said to Colrayn with a grin.

Barney was laughing all over his face. "Does my heart good to hear someone talk to Leroy in that tone of voice. It's about time he got shaken up." They were interrupted by Leroy's harsh crackling tones.

"This is Jasper Leroy, who's that? What the devil do you mean ringing me up at this hour of the night?"

"Hello, Jasper," answered Eddy softly. "I don't know whether you've heard of me, but I've heard of you, and what I have heard I don't like."

"If this is just some stupid, anonymous, insulting phone call you can hang up and go to hell," snarled Jasper. "I've got better things to do with my time than to listen to that."

"I said the name was Eddy Sinclair—Edward Sinclair the investigator—does that mean anything to you? The Edward Sinclair who was sitting on the *Monopolies Commission* in an advisory capacity not so long ago—"

Jasper Leroy had had trouble with the Monopolies Commission already, and he knew he was in for more. He gulped and just a little of the swagger and *braggadocio* went out of his voice.

"Oh, you're one of that crowd, are you? What the devil do you mean ringing me up this time of evening? Can't be that urgent."

"Whatever I want is urgent," rejoined Sinclair. "Now listen. I want to talk to you about the pollution of the river—the radio-activity."

"Agh! The radio-activity's a negligible level, there's not enough stuff in that river to make a geiger counter tick."

"Oh, isn't there!" retorted Sinclair, "Well, let me tell you this—at one spot on the bank which I tested about fifteen minutes ago, there is so much radio-activity that it's not safe to approach within fifty yards of it. Is that clear? When I send that report through, I'll

bring so much trouble tumbling down round your big fat neck, Jasper, that you won't be in business much longer."

"How dare you speak to me like that," bellowed Leroy.

"I'll speak to you, or anyone else, how I please," rejoined Sinclair. "Now look, I want to talk to you. It's urgent, it's important. I'm a busy man, and I suppose in your own petty, money-grubbing way, you are too. But you're going to talk to me. You're going to spare the time for it. Right. Now, shall I come over to your place, or are you coming down to my hotel?" He checked himself. He was so used to staying at hotels that the word rolled off his tongue automatically.

"If you want to see me, you blasted well come here," snorted the tycoon.

"Right! I'll see you in five minutes." Sinclair's own voice was a whiplash as he hung up.

"Well, you certainly did it," said Colrayn. "I never thought he'd see you. The old blighter always keeps me waiting."

"You don't know as much about the shady side of his business as we do on the monopolies commission—that's what shook him," said the investigator. "Know where his house is?"

"You bet," said Colrayn. "Can I come then?"

"Certainly! This is your pitch."

They drove off at speed, and Eddy amused himself by ripping large skid marks into the immaculate gravel of the Leroy drive, and spattering stones over the ornate step of the large, mock-Georgian house, which the tycoon had recently had built for himself.

He thundered on the front door with an urgency that would have denoted the approach of the Day of Judgement. An obsequious footman let him in, and the valet met them in a large, garish reception room.

"You're the person who telephoned, I believe?"

"I am! And I'm not a 'person,' I'm a man. Which is more than I can say for the present company."

"Well, really," snorted the valet, putting his nose in the air at an even more acute angle, and minced away.

"Sinclair is here, Mr. Leroy," he announced.

"MR. Sinclair is here," roared Eddy, "I'll have you calling me sir before I'm done. Or I'll break your affected neck."

"Don't you threaten me with violence," said the valet from the door. "I'm not used to dealing with persons of your type. I should think it may be necessary to call in the police and have you evicted."

"Before you start calling the police," remarked Eddy, "I'd have you know that I'm a personal friend of the Chief Commissioner and there are several things about your precious Jasper that the police might be very interested to know."

He walked over to a cocktail cabinet and helped himself to a double Scotch and soda. He purloined one of Jasper's cigarettes, and sat back in the best armchair that the room boasted. He didn't bother to stand when Leroy entered, neither did Colrayn.

The tycoon burst into the room like an angry hurricane.

"Now look here, Sinclair, what do you mean ringing me up and uttering threats at this hour of the night?"

"Don't bluster with me," said Sinclair, "it doesn't cut any ice. And it must be bad for your blood pressure. Now, shut up and listen."

Watching them, Colrayn knew that he was watching a battle of the giants. It was a clash of personality. Never before had Jasper Leroy come up against a man like Edward Sinclair. Never before had Jasper Leroy come up against anybody who was big enough to blast back at him and pay him in his own coin. For the first time in his life he was up against somebody who had more bluster, more whiplash in his voice than he had ever dreamed possible.

When it came to a verbal battle Sinclair could cut the tycoon to pieces, as easily as an expert swordsman could disarm a three year old child armed with a cane stick.

"Now," said the investigator when the sheer power of his personality had thrust the tycoon back into his chair, "we're going to

talk about radio-activity, we're going to talk about pollution in that river. My pal Barney tells me you've been polluting that place for years... so you are more directly responsible for this than anybody else."

"What!" Leroy had collapsed mentally rather like a punctured balloon. He was on the defensive and he was back-pedalling fast.

"If you don't know, I suppose I'd better tell you," said Sinclair. "You've been polluting that river, and what's worse, you've been pumping radio-activity into the thing. As a result of that, heaven alone knows what you've done to the wild life in it. It was their hard luck, I suppose? But I'm not here to advocate the cause of poisoned fish. I'm more concerned with the rodents that live there." He opened his brief case and plonked the enormous plaster cast down on the beautifully polished surface of Leroy's desk.

"Do you know what that is?"

"No—no, I don't think I do," said the Tycoon, puzzled, bewildered, and rather frightened.

"Do you know what this is then?" asked Sinclair, in a voice of heavy sarcasm, as he produced the neatly boxed geiger counter. The tycoon replied by slowly shaking his head.

Sinclair replied by unfastening the box and running the geiger counter slowly over the plaster cast.

"This is a plaster cast of a footprint that was found on the opposite side of the river, pretty close to the point where the young O'Jordon boy Ricky disappeared. The plaster was only in contact with the footprint four or five minutes. Listen!" The geiger counter was clicking merrily. "Do you know what that means? It means the geiger counter is radio-active, and it's radio-active because it has been in contact with radio-active substance. And it's my guess," he persisted, "that the radio-active substance with which it has been in contact is only in itself a second-hand radio-active touch point. *I think the original source came from out of that river!* It put its foot on the bank long enough for it to make that stretch of bank dangerously radio-active fifty yards around. And you're the man

who's been dumping radio-active waste in that water for years—so this can be laid fair and square at your door!" Edward Sinclair's eyes were red-hot gimlets... white-hot points of steel, boring and burning straight into Leroy's fat, flabby, quivering soul, mind and intellect.

"So?" quavered Leroy.

"So you've started something that we may not be able to stop. I can imagine what happened... but it's what is going to happen next that's bothering me most at this time," said the investigator. "The stuff you poured in killed all the fish, poisoned the marine life, except some incredibly hardy water animals. Maybe otters, beavers, rats, I don't know. I want to get this lump of plaster up to a zoological expert and find out."

His eyes burnt with an even brighter intensity as he glared at Leroy. "Due to your anti-social behaviour, there is something in that river—in my opinion—which is not only enormous; which is not only responsible for the disappearance of that boy—but which is damnably radio-active."

"You can't pin this on me. I haven't done anything deliberately wrong," said Leroy.

"No, but it's your fault," said Sinclair. "I understand you've been warned on many occasions, about the amount of pollution for which you have been responsible. You seemed to take very little notice of any warnings that were given by the authorities."

"There are too many of these little tin-pot bureaucrats trying to tell us what to do," snapped Leroy defensively.

"You happen to be talking about my friend, Mr. Colrayn, and I advise you to keep a civil tongue in your head," said Sinclair. "I haven't come here to bandy words. I've come here to get some facts out of you. Exactly how long have you been pumping this radio-active mess into the water? And I want *facts*. Because I know some facts about *you* that are in front of the Monopolies Commission at the moment. When I throw my weight in there, when I speak to the Director of Public Prosecutions, some things will shake you rigid. The

more you spill and the faster you spill it, the less likely I shall be to make things hot for you."

"This is blackmail," blustered Leroy.

"Call it what you like. I want results. How long?"

"I'm not a calculating machine, and I've got a far from perfect memory," stalled Leroy.

"Don't play for time. I want facts and I want 'em quick. How long? Ten years? Fifteen years?"

"Well, since the war." Again the tycoon was deflated. He looked like a stranded whale. Fat. Blubbery, helpless.

"I see—or just after—that would make it fifteen to sixteen years ago?"

"Near enough."

"Very interesting," said Sinclair, "so for fifteen years generations of rodents, aqua-rodents of some kind, have lived and moved and had their being in the river where you jettison the waste. Generation after generation have been born to these rodents—and rodents are quick breeders. I don't know whether we're dealing with a beaver or an otter or a rat, but I know this... What I've seen to-night scared me. And I don't scare easily. Look at this—it's a foot, an animal's foot. Normally not more than an inch across... how big is this? Twenty inches? We're up against a creature three or four times the size of an elephant. And it's your fault that creature exists." The tycoon was regaining a little of his courage, his drive, his force.

"Absolute nonsense," he panted. "I don't believe a word of it. Some fool kid digging footprint-shaped holes."

"Look at this cast again," retorted Sinclair. "It's the work of an artist, and what artist would want to waste his time sitting on a damp, cold, draughty river bank where a murder has probably been committed? You know the old adage about the murderer returning to the scene of the crime?"

Leroy nodded dumbly.

"Well, that means the tow path is going to be a pretty unhealthy place. Nobody's going to wander round there in case the

police pick 'em up on suspicion—since that kid disappeared—certainly nobody's going to sit there digging artistic holes that look like the footprints of a gigantic rodent."

"Unless," said the tycoon, blustering and trying to cover himself, "unless you've overlooked the basic, simple fact, Mr. Clever-Investigator."

"And what do you call the simple, basic facts, my dear Watson?" snarled Eddy Sinclair, sarcastically.

"Well, what if whoever is responsible for that boy O'Jordon's disappearance, had deliberately dug, or made, or sculptured this foot-print in order to give the impression that there was something peculiar going on?" protested the tycoon.

"Well, I think this cast is *too good* to be a phoney, and I think if anyone was intelligent enough to think this one up he'd have been intelligent enough to know that not one man in a hundred was going to take any notice of it, or believe it. If he was going to try to draw a red herring across the trail of a murder, don't you think that our mysterious Mr. X, whoever he may be, would have gone to great pains to think of a more convincing, or more likely story?"

"Maybe he would. What are you going to do about it?"

"Well, the first thing I'm going to do is to extract a promise from you to stop pouring this radio-active muck into the water."

"I can't," protested Leroy. "It'll interrupt all my factory processes. I shall lose thousands."

"Serve you ruddy well right," retorted Sinclair. "You don't deserve to have thousands to lose. You don't deserve to have pence, by the look of you."

He was cracking a verbal whip in the tycoon's face, as a powerful lion tamer cracks a whip, to control the giant beasts in his ring cage.

Something that might have been a fatuous smile of triumph appeared on Leroy's coarse, swarthy face. "You can't do anything to me. You can't pin anything on me. You can't cause me any trouble."

"I'll cause you more trouble than you ever knew there was in this world unless you're going to stop jettisoning this waste."

"Not on your life. You'll have to get an injunction out to stop me," snarled Leroy.

The two men stood glaring at one another.

"All right then, if you won't help. If you won't be warned, then it's up to you," said Sinclair.

Eddy turned on his heel. "Don't forget when the final shake-down comes, you had been warned."

With which parting shot he marched swiftly and purposefully from the great vulgar house which accommodated the tycoon.

CHAPTER FIVE
Teleportation

THE church Sewing Circle was a vision of peace and tranquillity. A group of earnest middle-aged ladies with a sprinkling of older ones, and a mere *soupçon* of the under-thirties, were sitting beneath the shade of the tall vicarage conifers. Their needles clicked busily, almost as busily as their tongues.

The vicar's wife was passing from one member of her happy little tribe to another, chatting here, admiring a pattern there, and occasionally even managing to do a little knitting herself. She was a terrifyingly *earnest* woman, with a voice that had an appealing throb to it. She could make an appeal for a ha'penny for 'destitute potato sellers in Lerwick' in a voice that made it sound as though the end of the world depended upon the ha'penny being given.

"I *do* think these are so nice, *dear* Mrs. Bloggins," she said, holding up into the sunlight for closer examination a completely indescribable-looking tangle of wool and stitches. Mrs. Bloggins 'charred' by day, and 'did' the church for a very nominal fee. She was what the vicar's wife, and the vicar himself, for that matter, described as a 'treasure'.

"One doesn't get her sort nowadays," said the vicar. That was true. Trade Unionism and an advanced standard of living had seen to that. Mrs. Bloggins was one of the old guard. She scrubbed when there was anything to scrub, and she sewed when there was anything to sew.

"I'm glad you like it, ma'am," she said.

"What exactly *is* it?" asked the vicar's wife, with less than her usual tact.

"Why, it's a dish cloth."

"Oh, of course. How stupid of me," said the vicar's wife. It could equally well have been an aspidistra cover, or a fishing net.

She passed around the rest of her little group, fluttering like a large and amiable butterfly among the knitting flowers.

Beady-eyed little Miss Hambledon was busy doing things with kettles and tea-pots. A tray of delicate china cups, and another tray containing microscopic rock buns came floating around the garden, and the knitters daintily laid aside their tasks and began sipping their tea, with little fingers extended.

The tea had gone about half-way round when there was a terrified scream, and the tea tray crashed to the ground, as though it had been red hot.

"Good gracious me," said the vicar's wife. "Whatever is wrong, my dear?" She turned quite quickly and saw—IT! *Then she screamed too*.

And soon the peace and tranquillity of that old English lawn beneath its shady conifers had turned into a scene rapidly resembling Bedlam. Terrified women were running and screaming, and fainting; for in the centre of the vicarage lawn stood a creature of such appalling and unbelievable horror, that only in the wildest of nightmares could anything like it have been envisaged. The Rev. Septimus Brown—a short, gnome-like, bespectacled individual, with rather avaricious little eyes, who was very definitely a *career* churchman, and the despair of his more visionary colleagues, leapt out of his study like a rabbit emerging from a burrow, pursued by a ferret.

"Dear me! Dear me! Is something wrong?" He peered myopically across the lawn. At that distance the creature appeared to him to resemble a moving haystack, as much as anything else. His wife passed him at a speed that would have done credit to Christ Chataway, and snatched up the telephone. She rattled the receiver frantically.

"Operator, I want the police, the army, ambulances—everything. Quickly! Quickly! This is the Vicarage. *There's a monster on the lawn!*"

The operator hesitated for a second.

"Is this a hoax?" she asked suddenly.

It says much for the vicar's wife's powers of persuasion that she managed to persuade the exchange operator that this was a genuine emergency, within a mere
ten seconds.

Colrayn and Sinclair were in the police station when the message came through.

The sergeant, grim, tough old veteran that he was, opened his eyes incredulously as the garbled story crackled through the receiver.

"Stone the crows," he muttered under his breath. "Hey, Mr. Sinclair," Eddy walked across. "You know this business you were telling me about-plaster cast and all that
sort of thing——"

"Yes?" Sinclair's voice held interest.

"I was half inclined to laugh when you talked about monsters, *but there's one on the vicarage lawn.*"

"If this thing is anything to go by," said Sinclair, indicating the plaster cast, "then it's no use running round there with two squad cars and some light rifles. We're going to need the Terriers out."

"Just what I was thinking, sir. Richards!" he bellowed "phone the Terriers. See if you can get some of them over to the vicarage quick. Tell them it's an emergency."

"Right, sir," answered Constable Richards.

"Oh, and a couple of squad cars down to the vicarage. I'm not stopping for permission—I'm just going to issue firearms. Can't stop to run round for a magistrate when that thing is wandering about. She says it's as big as a haystack."

"What did she say it *was*?" asked Sinclair.

"Well, she was very distressed," answered the sergeant, "but she said it was a thing like a *gigantic beaver*."

"*That would fit*," said Sinclair, "of course it would. Generations of radio-active beavers mutating and breeding until they achieve giant size, under the foul black waters of that river. Friendly little

animals when they're the proper size, but *a beaver the size of a haystack*—no thanks!" He and Barney sprinted for the car. The police transport boys were warming up, but it was Sinclair and Colrayn who reached the vicarage first.

As the private investigator trod on the brakes he said grimly; "You'll find an automatic in the dashboard locker. Can you use one?"

"I can try," said Colrayn with a grin.

"Good man." Sinclair was out of the car, his own gun in his hand, in a matter of seconds, racing across the lawn below the conifers. He had only the haziest of notions of what he would find.

But when he arrived the lawn was *empty*—empty save for dropped bundles of knitting; a hastily overturned chair; a smashed tea-cup; a wildly flung spoon.

"Where the devil is it?" asked Colrayn. "If it's that big we surely couldn't miss it."

"Look!" said Sinclair grimly. Right in the centre of the soft turf were *two gigantic footprints*. Footprints of the hind feet of a beast whose proportions could only be guessed at. And they were the exact replicas of a footprint that had been found on a river bank tow-path.

"This is crazy," ejaculated Sinclair. "There's no *trail* of footprints. Even allowing for the fact that the thing could jump seventy or eighty feet, there's nothing in sight."

The police arrived and began piling out of their cars, .303's at the ready. Within two moments more a detachment of Territorials had arrived, and an ambulance of St. John's men, who hastily administered smelling salts and sal volatile to the distraught members of the women's Sewing Circle. A St. John's man came across to the police.

"Nobody injured, sir. They're just suffering from shock."

"Well, thank the Lord for that," returned the constable.

"Nobody hurt—yet?" asked Sinclair.

"No—fortunately," said the police sergeant.

"That's a blessing. It's also a ruddy miracle. Just a minute, here's the Terrier Captain."

The leader of the volunteer brigade was moving swiftly towards them.

"What's all this about a monster on the lawn?" he asked. "Looks as if there's been one here, but we can't find a trace of it. Are your men armed?" said the sergeant.

"Rather, old boy," rejoined the Terrier Captain. "I've even got a couple of bazookas and a flame thrower. I've got enough stuff here to stop a tank division."

"Thank goodness somebody's on their toes," said the policeman.

"Look, old boy," said Sinclair. "Do you think you could possibly split your men up? And fan out? How many have you got with you?"

"Fifty or sixty—we were just going on a manoeuvre," said the Captain.

"And I've got two car loads of men," said the sergeant. "With you and Mr. Sinclair that's nearly seventy of us—a pretty worth-while force."

"We can do something with that," agreed Sinclair.

"Look Captain, if you'll direct ops. we'll put ourselves at your disposal."

"By all means," said the Territorial Captain. "We'll get up a quick dispersal plan, and we'll comb the grounds.

"I don't think we're going to find *it*," said Sinclair, "I want your chaps to keep looking out for these——" he pointed to the footprint, "let's put a chap in the middle of the lawn so nobody goes jamming all over them. But tell him to keep well back from the footprint itself."

"Why is that?" said the Captain.

"Because the blasted thing is radio-active," said Sinclair. He had his small portable geiger counter in his hand and laid it close to the footprint. The needle shot up well past the danger mark.

"Ye gods and little fishes," said the Terrier Captain. "A monster is bad enough, but a *radio-active* monster—"

"I know," agreed Sinclair. "The brute itself we can probably stop with a good volley of rifle shot—certainly a bazooka shell, but that radio active menace..."

The Terrier Captain wiped sweat from his brow. "I don't like the sound of this at all," he said, "not one little bit I don't. Anyway, let's get on with this search party."

Under the Captain's swift and efficient organization, the men split up and spread out over the vicarage grounds. But there was no sign of the creature anywhere, and at the end of half an hour when they reported back to the vicarage drawing-room, which had been turned into a temporary headquarters by the bustling, efficient, Terrier Captain there was nothing to report.

The monster had just materialised in the centre of the lawn, then disappeared, almost as swiftly as it had come, leaving behind it nothing but two gigantic, radio-active footprints.

"It doesn't make sense, old boy," said the Terrier Captain, twirling his gigantic moustache, "doesn't make sense at all."

"I think it might," said Sinclair. "It might make a very strange, wildly imaginative kind of sense..."

"Something on your mind?" said the Terrier Captain.

"Only a hunch," answered the investigator. "You see, it wasn't so long ago that I was doing some research into ESP—"

"What the devil's that?" asked Colrayn.

"Extra-Sensory Perception," explained his friend. "The ability to pick up thoughts from a distance."

"Oh, telepathy," said the Terrier Captain, as the light suddenly dawned. "What's telepathy got to do with this thing?"

"Telepathy isn't the only faculty of ESP," explained the investigator. "There are others. Telepathy isn't dangerous. Could be, I suppose, if our minds were open to the probing minds of others, if even our innermost thoughts were unveiled." He grinned broadly. "Some of mine couldn't stand unveiling, I'll tell you."

"Nor could mine, old boy," grinned the Terrier Captain with a throaty chuckle.

Sinclair's face was creased into a thoughtful frown. "I'll tell you what I was really thinking of——" he said. They clustered round him, listening eagerly. "The other aspects of ESP are telekinesis and teleportation."

"What the devil are they?" asked the police sergeant.

"Telekinesis," explained Sinclair, "is the power of the human mind to move solid objects without touching them physically. To control the throw of a dice, for example, by willing a certain number to come up. To move ping- pong balls across a table—something like that."

"I thought those things were just in Science Fiction..."

"Oh, no," said the investigator. "It's fact. Professor Rhine of Duke University is doing some brilliant work on it. He's come up with some pretty conclusive proof that it can be done by certain very rare individuals. Some of them just possess this faculty, in the same way that others of us can write or draw or paint pictures, while some people can't. It's just one of those things that you have, or haven't got. One man can sit down at the piano and play Beethoven at sight, And another man would take ten, twenty years, and then could only give a quarter of the performance."

"Yes, I certainly see what you're getting at, old boy," said the Terrier Captain: "There are certain strange faculties of the mind which certain individuals possess and others don't. You think that this ability to move solid objects is one of them... ? "

"Yes, and to get to the main point at issue," said Sinclair. "If certain human minds—which are after all of limited size—have that ability in a limited way. For instance, if a certain human brain convoluted in a certain way along the cerebral cortex, can move a ping-pong ball a few inches, what could a brain, belonging to a creature of the size that stood on this lawn, be able to do? Especially if its convolutions have been in some way affected by the mutations and radiations which it has absorbed?"

"You're still working on the theory that it is a radio-active monster, caused by the stuff they've been pouring into that river?" asked the Terrier Captain.

"Oh, indubitably. There isn't a shadow of doubt about it. The very fact that the footprints are so strongly radio-active... We're not up against a mere giant beaver, we're up against something *fantastic*."

"This telekinesis, if the thing can move solid objects, does that necessarily mean it can move *itself*?"

"No, that's the third part," said Sinclair, "that's the other member of the infernal trio of ESP gifts—that's teleportation—to be able to move itself."

"But doesn't it just float through the air when it does this?" said the sergeant. "Wouldn't we have seen it drifting away, like a ruddy great balloon?"

"Not necessarily," said Sinclair. "In theory a teleport in a very, very advanced condition might be able to simply will himself to appear at another spot, and hey presto—just like an infernal conjuring trick, he's done it. He simply disappears at point A and reappears at point B."

"Good lord," said the sergeant.

"As a matter of fact, one of my hobbies is conjuring," said Sinclair. "Now this may sound as though I'm getting off the track, but believe me I'm not. I was going through some very ancient literature on the subject and I came across some tricks that were brilliantly authenticated. As I said, I'm something of an expert on conjuring, and even with modern equipment, no 20th century conjuror could emulate, or could re-perform, any of the tricks in this old manuscript. Back in the 17th century it was—now, if somebody in the 17th century suddenly discovered that he had the power of teleportation, and knowing the enthusiasm with which they burnt witches and wizards, don't you think that such a man would pretend to be an illusionist, tell them that he was just *a conjurer*?"

"Good heavens! That's a new gimmick," said the sergeant. "You mean what if, instead of the illusionist trying to persuade his audience there may be something magical about his performance, that was a genuine case of a man who had some almost magical power——"

"Some mental power," said Sinclair, "I don't like the word 'magic'. A genuine, scientific power, and trying to persuade his *audience* that he was just an illusionist."

"I see what you mean," said the sergeant, "By the left, I do."

"Well, if it could be done once by a man—with the brain of a human being—it could be done again by a monster as big as a haystack…"

"Yes, by the saints we've got a problem here," said Barney Colrayn. "We're up against a creature the size of a house, which is not only dangerously radio-active but which has the power to appear and disappear almost anywhere that it chooses."

"It's going to be a damned elusive target," said the Terrier Captain. "You've no sooner got him in range than he disappears and he's right there in the gun pit with you!"

"It's going to be an almost impossible target," said Sinclair, "and the thing that's really worrying me is this—"

They leaned forward eagerly, listening.

"Go on," said the sergeant.

"That thing is the by-product of years of breeding—that's the word, 'breeding.' There's an awful lot of black poisoned water out there in that river, and it's been there a long time. It's deep—hellishly deep—what means have we of knowing just how many of these brutes there may be lurking about in there? Are we up against fifty—a hundred—a thousand?"

"I never thought of it in that way," said the sergeant.

"I was thinking in terms of just one,—like the Loch Ness Monster."

"And what if they spread?" asked Sinclair. "After all they've got more facilities for spreading than any creature that ever was on the

earth."

The men looked at each other in grave, thoughtful silence.

CHAPTER SIX
Consultant Zoologist

SEPTIMUS HARBOTTLE had to be seen to be believed. He was far more like something out of a Dickensian comedy than a real live, walking, breathing, human being. That was probably because Septimus Harbottle didn't do much in the way of living, moving or breathing. He was a singularly sedentary individual. He had a gigantic head, a microscopic body, long tapering fingers, and gigantic eyes which bulged in the manner of a koala bear.

But despite his tremendously unprepossessing physical appearance, there was about Septimus Harbottle a certain flair, a certain faculty, a certain genius. He was a zoologist. He was in fact *THE* zoologist. He was unashamedly consulted by the highest authorities in the land, and his word was regarded as final on any controversial matter.

He could quote any number of theses without the slightest hesitation. He was an animated encyclopedia, and what Septimus Harbottle did not know about animals just wasn't worth knowing.

It had not taken Edward Sinclair long to discover that the man who could help him most quickly in the identification of the gigantic plaster cast would be Harbottle. He was not a difficult man to reach, for despite a position of great authority in the academic world, there was about him no misconceived notion of his own importance. Harbottle was interested in his job—far more interested in his job than most eminent scientists—even the dedicated ones. He was so interested in his work that he had no time to think of himself as a human being. He was just a zoologist. Animals were his life. Yet only in a scientific sense. He was no dog or cat lover. He kept no pets, but show him an animal as a piece of scientific complexity, and he would go into it as thoroughly as an engineer would strip down a motor. He picked up the shrilling telephone and listened to Sinclair's voice.

"Why, I shall be delighted to see you. You have a problem you wish to discuss with me? And the name is——? " The eminent old zoologist employed no secretary, consequently his work, his study, his laboratory were in a glorious state of organised chaos. Provided that he himself continued to minister to his own needs and requirements, he could find things—after a time. But had some well-meaning colleague come in and cleaned up for him, he would have just ceased to function, because nothing would ever have come to light again.

The old man looked at his watch. "I have nothing very pressing on at the moment, I don't suppose you could come over now?"

"I was very much hoping I could," replied Eddy Sinclair. "It's most kind of you, professor."

"A pleasure, a pleasure! Always glad to discuss a problem with a colleague."

"I'm not exactly a colleague. I'm only an interested layman. I only hope I shan't be wasting your time."

"Not at all, not at all. Knowledge is not such a tender plant that it withers when approached," said the old man.

"All right. I'll be straight over. I should think about ten minutes. I'm on the other side of the city." He did it in nine and a half…

And as Professor Septimus Harbottle opened the door to the persistent ringing, he took an instant liking to the tall, broad-shouldered newcomer.

"And you're Mr. Sinclair, I would guess from your voice," he said.

"That's right."

"And what's that interesting looking parcel you're carrying? It looks rather exciting. May I take it?"

"Well, there's just one thing," said Sinclair, "it is mildly radio-active. Not dangerously so, but I thought I'd better tell you."

"Radio-active! How very interesting. What is it exactly?"

He was already leading the way through to his laboratory.

"It's a plaster cast of a foot print."

"A footprint? But it's over eighteen inches across. Something abroad?"

"No, I'm afraid it isn't," said Eddy.

"What!" gasped the old man. "You're sure this is not a hoax, Mr. Sinclair, I have a great dislike of being hoaxed."

"I assure you it isn't. If you want to check up on my credentials you can ring the Chief Commissioner of Police, or the Home Secretary himself. They both know me."

"In that case I should be very doubtful if it were a hoax," smiled the old man. "Though Chief Commissioners and Home Secretaries are not absolutely infallible, of course." Again, that dry, academic humour. They had reached the laboratory and amidst a vast array of zoological equipment, semi-stuffed and dissected specimens, Sinclair unwrapped the parcel.

"Good gracious me," gasped the old man, adjusting his glasses. "I find it very, very difficult to believe. You're sure this isn't just a cleverly constructed model? No, it can't be! Unless you're the sculptor genius of all time, my boy. It looks like *trogontherium—but they've been extinct since the Pleistocene epoch*..."

"I said before—I'm just a layman," said Sinclair. "Can you tell me what trogontherium is, in simple language?"

"Yes, yes, of course. It's fossil beaver. They were discovered in North America and Europe, some of them reached giant size. Trogontherium did for a start. But as I told you before, they did, I admit, coincide with early man, very, very early man, and this particular specimen, this trogontherium which you have here was the one that did co-exist with early man. At least that's the nearest thing I've ever seen to a trogontherium. You tell me this is a plaster cast of a foot print. Where did you find the footprint? It could have been wonderfully preserved in some kind of shale-bed, mud... but I've never seen anything so good as this. It can't be fossil. It's too perfectly preserved."

"It's not fossil. 'Cos the place I found this is the last place on earth you'd find a fossil—a sort of path beside a river... about a hundred miles to the north-east of here. One of the East Anglian industrial towns. I won't say exactly where for the moment, if you don't mind. We're trying to keep this matter secret."

"You mean to say you think this footprint was made by a living animal?" said the old man. "That's preposterous, my dear sir. Absolutely preposterous! No beavers of that size——" He broke off short. "What did you say about this radio-activity. You say your plaster cast is radio-active?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then the foot print itself must have been a great deal more radio-active to have affected the plaster cast, mustn't it, for surely, the plaster was only in contact with it for a very few minutes."

"That is correct," said the investigator.

"Well, I'm damned," said the old man, scratching his head. "I wonder... I've been making some experiments in mutation, but I was working with fruit flies. They give quicker results, and you need quick results when you're my age, otherwise you won't see the end of the experiment." Again that wry, academic smile. "But how did this beaver—if it is a gigantic beaver—come to be affected with radio activity? Surely nobody's had them on this scale in a laboratory and they've broken loose?"

"No, I think the thing is purely a horrible accident," said Sinclair. "Let me put you right in the picture. In the town in question there is an industry which hurls out radio-active waste into a river, and has been doing so for fifteen years. The other stuff on the river is mainly filth and refuse of various kinds, some industrial and some domestic. It's about the least prepossessing stretch of water I've seen anywhere. Now, as a result of this—and I'm speaking purely as a layman—one or two incredibly hardy beavers have been living in this water, irrespective of what was being pumped into them. They managed to withstand the poisons and the toxins, and then came this radio active waste. It has somehow affected them, and generation after generation of these beavers have gradually gone on

increasing in size, until they have produced this radio-active giant. I want some information about beavers in general."

"I can tell you a little bit about beavers in general," said the zoologist, "and your theory would seem to have very good scientific backing, in that they were capable of achieving giant size, as in the case of trogontherium. You see, the radio activity could have triggered off a mutant series which has produced an atavism, that is a scientific term which we employ when a species takes a retrograde evolutionary step."

"I see," murmured the investigator.

"It is far more likely for atavism to take place due to radio-activity than for a progressive mutation to evolve. We may not be dealing with pure atavism—there may be something else in addition. It is such a wide and complicated field. But let us take something I understand a little better. Let me tell you what I know about beavers. It is, as you know, a large, aquatic, gnawing animal—mammal—and can easily be recognised by its large, flat, scaly tail. The old world beaver, or to give it its scientific name, *Castor fiber*, is found in Europe and North Asia, and the very similar American beaver, which is known as *Castor canadensis*, is different mainly in regard to the formation of the nasal bones, in the skull of course."

"I see," nodded Sinclair.

"Beavers form a family, zoologically speaking, of *Castoridae* and they are distinguished by the fact that their hind feet are webbed. and the second hind toe has a double claw. Look!" He pointed to the print. "Now, the present day species of beaver reach a length of about four feet, of which one third is tail, giving a body length from nose to stern, so to speak, of about two foot three, discounting the tail. Perhaps some larger specimens two foot six. The main commercial value of the beaver is their fur. There are two kinds. The first is close set, grey and very silky, whereas the rest of the hirsuite covering is a reddish brown colour and is much, much longer. At one time beaver was very common in England, but I am astounded to hear that even an ordinary specimen should be living in a river in East Anglia. The European beaver, as far as I knew, was confined to

the Elbe and the Rhone, and of course, they also live in Scandinavia. The American species has also decreased its population. A great pity, a great pity. A pleasant little animal, a gregarious animal, living in small streams as a rule, where they increase the depth of the water so they can prevent it freezing to the bottom. They build dams of mud, stone, tree trunks, that kind of thing—you know. You've heard of a beaver dam, of course."

"Of course," agreed Sinclair.

"They demonstrate great ingenuity and their dams are of great strength. When they have built a dam of sufficient size to give them the depth they require, they build what is known, scientifically and popularly, as a beaver lodge, that is, they build a series of chambers under the water, formed of exactly the same material as the dam. In the northern latitudes the mud freezes very, very hard in winter, and it keeps out wolves and other enemies, of which the beaver has several in the northern latitudes.

"The American beaver lives upon the bark of the aspen, though it can live on trees, water plants and other vegetation."

"What about their breeding habits?" asked Sinclair. "That's what's interesting me more than anything else."

"Well, three or four young are usually born in May—perhaps April—and that gives you a colony consisting of a pair of adults with their young, of two years. At the end of the second year the young leave home, during the spring, and wander away, looking for a suitable place to begin a new colony. That in a nutshell, is the beaver."

"They are not carnivorous, then? That's a relief," said Sinclair.

"No, not carnivorous at all," said the old scientist, "you see, they belong to the order of rodentia—now rodentia are an order of placental mammals. The order is characterised by the incisor teeth—they are the front teeth, you realise——" he explained simply, for the benefit of the layman, "and these have been developed down to a single functional pair in each jaw. They grow throughout life and are very chisel-like. Normally, rodents are small or medium in size, they

are plantigrade or partly so, and normally five-toed. There are no canine teeth in the rodent, and the cheek teeth are anything from six to twelve in number, and may be rooted, or on occasion ever-growing, and they are arranged in an unbroken series. The orbits are not surrounded by bone, except in the aberrant-maned rat, known scientifically as *lophiomys*. The skull is characterised by very large premaxillae and these very large premaxillae completely separate the nasals from the maxillae themselves. They are also characterised by the fact that there is a very wide space between the incisors and cheek teeth, and with the exception of the duplicidentata, an anteroposteriorly elongated groove which assists the articulation of the lower jaw. In the case of the beaver they feed chiefly on vegetable matter, as I have said, most species, however, will eat insects and other animal matter when necessity arises. There are a few predators, and one or two of them enjoy a piscatorial diet..."

"Sorry," said Sinclair.

"Fish," explained the zoologist.

"Oh, I see," nodded the investigator.

"There have been wide differences of opinion as to the classification of this order, but I myself have slightly modified the scheme of the great Tullberg, which he completed in 1899, although it has been necessary to make one or two modifications since that date, and I may add in all modesty that the modifications are my own." Again that dry, scientific pun. "Now a little more scientific fact about the beavers themselves, your family of Castoridae is represented as far as I know by two living species of beaver, although at one time it was a very large and varied group indeed. Why, fossil forms carry the beavers back right as far as the middle Oligocene, but except for the differences in the tooth pattern these earlier beavers have remarkable similarity to their descendants. There is another sub-family of Castoroidinae which includes the giant forms. Although even the majority of the giant forms didn't attain anything like the size of that foot-cast. Nothing like. Some of them, in fact I think almost all of them, got to about the size of a

bear. There were one or two that made a greater size, but not many. The cheek-teeth of the bear-sized group had a slightly different pattern. These are also characteristic of the Pleistocene of North America and I can also tell you something about an even earlier type, which appeared in the lower Miocene era. But I'm afraid that information, though historically very useful, is not going to assist you with your problem, young man. May I ask you exactly in what respect you've got yourself involved with these giant beavers? Just curiosity or—? "

"I'm acting in a semi-official capacity," said Eddy Sinclair. "I'm a private investigator..."

"Oh, how very, very exciting," said the old man. "I sometimes wish I had taken up a more active career instead of zoology, but then, I don't suppose I'd have been any use. At least I have achieved a certain niche in my own chosen field, so I suppose I mustn't grumble. However, in case you don't know him, there is a gentleman whose name and address I will give you because he's been carrying out a great deal of research lately on the kind of work that might be of interest to you. His name is Brogan, Professor James Brogan." The old man wrote, almost illegibly, on a small piece of notepaper on the laboratory bench. "Anything a little bit off-trail, or unusual, Brogan's the man. Good luck to you, my boy—now if you'll excuse me I must get on with another experiment…" The old zoologist shook hands with Eddy Sinclair and the investigator left.

CHAPTER SEVEN
Sinclair's Miracle Boy

BEFORE leaving London the investigator made a call on an internationally known firm who supplied diving equipment. He inspected several suits but found nothing to his liking. Finally he called aside one of their expert consultants, and under strictest security regulations explained to him just exactly what he wanted.

The fellow scratched his head for a moment, and looked at Sinclair in amazement.

"You don't think you can do it, eh?" said Eddy.

"I don't say *we can't* do it, but it's going to be damned awkward," said the diving expert. "You obviously aren't going to be up against maximum pressure, because it looks like a depth of seventy to eighty feet..."

"Yes, that's about it. Can't be shallower than fifty or sixty feet, though, or it wouldn't conceal what I'm looking for. The main need is for a suit to give protection against radio-activity."

"I've got nothing like that," said the diving expert, "nothing at all."

"Lead is the thing."

"If we took one of our rubberised "Vulcano" suits and covered it with powdered lead—perhaps two or three layers of powdered lead, and then covered it with rubber so we increased the thickness... in other words, if you took a maximum depth suit, impregnated with powdered lead, I should think it would give you all the protection you'd need. Depends on the level of radio-activity, of course, it wouldn't be much use in front of an A-bomb."

"The level isn't all that high, but it's unpleasantly dangerous," said Sinclair.

"I think we could manage that. It'll take some time to prepare."

"How long? I can get Government backing for this. It may be a matter of No.1 Priority."

"I see. Well, in that case we could turn over a couple of machines for the job and have it ready in twenty-four hours."

"That's what I call service," said Sinclair with a smile. "O.K. The other problem now is to find some kind of face shield. You could obviously do me a lead-coated helmet. What about the eye-pieces. It's no good going down there if I can't ruddy well see anything. And I don't want to come up with radio-active eyeballs, either."

The diving constructor snapped his fingers. "Got it," he said. "You know the stuff they use at Harwell and those other research stations? That very thick, specially treated, radio active shield glass, through which they observe their remote control experiments."

"I'm with you," said Sinclair.

"If you could get us a piece of that, we could replace the normal helmet eye-piece with some of it."

"Exactly," said the investigator. "Good show. I'll get on to Harwell or one of the other establishments and get a piece rushed down by private car, or messenger. How large a piece will you need to allow for cutting?"

"Well, send us a foot square, and then if we do have a gash up we can have another go."

"Right. Better get a couple of feet, I think. They use it in big panels."

"O.K. then, up to you. It'll save any delays just in case there's a failure."

"Good," said Sinclair.

He left his measurements and went to see the Home Secretary. He called in at the Chief Commissioner's office on the way and began explaining.

"It's all right," said the Chief Commissioner, "we're not quite as slow off the mark as some people think, are we? I've already had a full report from the officers of that establishment. It's in the security files. I was half expecting you to drop in, you old rascal. Bad pennies

have nothing on you, when it comes to turning up in trouble, Sinclair,"

"Trouble?" said the investigator, with a look of mock aggrievement.

"It looks like being the biggest security job we've had for some time. M.I.5. are in on it already," answered the Chief Commissioner. "I don't like this diving idea of yours much... You want me to fix it with the atomic research establishment, to get that glass down there for you, I suppose?"

"That's about the long and short of it," said Sinclair. "I shall have to get the Home Secretary in."

"He's in already as far as having been informed. Poor old bureaucrats aren't always as bad as you private investigators think they are," smiled the Chief, and rapidly began filling in details for the latest developments. He turned to Sinclair with a smile as he put the phone down. "O.K. boy, you've got all you need. You're official from now on. At least till the end of this case."

"Does that let me in on the pay-roll?" asked Sinclair.

The Chief Commissioner nodded.

"Expenses and twenty-five a week. All right?"

"And for that I get the company's undying gratitude and a lethal dose of radio-activity," said the investigator with a wry grin.

"Never mind, think of the medal you'll get."

"Fat lot of good that'll do me," said Sinclair. "Nailed on top of my box."

"Oh, they wouldn't do that. They don't waste medals that way," said the Chief Commissioner. "They'd hang it up in a little niche in Westminster Abbey for you."

Eddy Sinclair was not a patient man, and after he had left the offices of the Chief Commissioner, it took him all his time to fill in the twenty-four hours during which the diving firm were performing miracles in the way of a radio-active-proof suit.

The time passed at last, however, and Eddy hurried round to collect it.

"Just completed and tested out. I don't think we've done at all badly."

"I don't either," commended Sinclair as he examined the heavy, lead impregnated apparatus. "It looks like being just the ideal thing. Now, I shall probably need one of your fitting experts to come up with me and get to work on the problem straight away. Have you got anybody who's willing to come?"

"Oh, I don't think any of our chaps would mind," said the expert. "I'll tell them that there is slight radiation risk."

"They should be all right on the path itself, provided that one of the things I'm looking for doesn't pop up," said Sinclair enigmatically.

"I wish you'd tell me a bit more, old boy."

"I'm afraid I can't. The great shield of Whitehall has descended and decreed that nobody knows anything."

"I know. We've done jobs like this before," said the diving executive. He disappeared in search of some volunteer personnel and returned with a seasoned-looking old veteran who had been through quite a number of hair- raising experiences with salvage work.

"I'll be pleased to come with you, Mr. Sinclair," said the fitter, a dour old Scot by the name of MacTavish.

"Pleased to have you," returned the investigator. "Got a geiger counter on the premises? If not I've got one meself. You can watch the radiation level for me. If it gets too hot, you can pull me up and we'll get out of it quick. Are you ready to leave?"

"Aye, when you like," said the Scot. "It's better than walking round the machines." He got his hat and coat and a suitcase full of fitting equipment, and laying the special suit carefully in the back of the car, he and Sinclair began driving north-east.

They called on the local police headquarters and picked up Barney Colrayn en route. It was early afternoon and they stood on

the towpath, not far from the railed-off section where the radio active footprint had been discovered on the opposite bank of the river, at the spot where young Ricky O'Jordon had last been seen.

"What exactly are you hoping to find?" asked Colrayn.

"It's like this," said Sinclair, "after talking to Professor Septimus Harbottle the zoologist. I had a sudden and terrifying idea. He was speaking in terms of that beaver leaping up and snatching the boy, but two things that Harbottle said about beavers seemed to open up a completely new line of thought. In the first place if the boy was intended for food, why should a beaver suddenly go carnivorous when it's normally plantigrade? Secondly, if these beavers are maintaining anything like their original pattern, there'll be lodges—there'll be holes with air in them where the beaver can live."

"You mean you think that kid is still alive, *down there?*" asked Colrayn. "With all that radio-activity, and those giant beavers?"

"It's a slim chance I know—but he *may* be. And if he is, I'm going to get him out. I hate to think of the poor little devil being alive down there. I think if it was me—"

"I'd rather have been eaten," said the Sanitary Inspector.

"I think I would too. But kids are amazingly resilient, you know. Their minds aren't quite as set as ours... what would be terror to us might just be interesting and strange to a child. Anyway, I'm going to have a look. If there is a beaver lodge down there, the child might possibly be in it."

As he spoke MacTavish was bolting him into the suit.

"Now, you've got enough oxygen in that cylinder for an hour-and-a-half. If you're not up in an hour——"

"I hope to be up long before that," said Sinclair. "If we're anywhere near the spot."

"If you get into any trouble, just pull the line and we'll haul you up."

"Right," said the investigator and began lowering himself into the inky water.

The powerful lamp on the helmet of the suit stabbed into the inky blackness ahead of him.

"There's one thing," thought Sinclair as he descended into the Stygian depths. "If that kid is alive he's a miracle boy."

CHAPTER EIGHT
Rescue

IT WAS inky black under the waters of that hideous, Stygian river. Eddy Sinclair was no coward, but as the tiny searchlight atop his helmet sought vainly to penetrate the surrounding gloom, even the valiant investigator's swashbuckling heart almost failed him for fear.

Fear gripped him with fingers as cold as the dark, filthy water, fear of what sinister, strange shape might suddenly come swirling out of the dark mess. Fear that his feet might stumble on the partially chewed cadaver of the boy he hoped might still be alive. The boy he jokingly referred to as his miracle boy.

He tried to weight up the odds prosaically in his mind as he made his way slowly forward along the bed of that foul, polluted river.

The boy might easily have died of fright when he had seen the badger, plunged in, and sunk. He might have been crushed in the fearsome jaws of the monster, or struck on the head by its gigantic claw. He might easily have been killed by the overdose of radiation. He might have suffocated. He might have drowned on the way to the thing's lair.

The chances of his survival were several thousand to one against. There was another worry in Sinclair's mind—what if the *boy* had been *changed* by the radiation? Had been transmuted, translated, into *something else*... what if he was no longer a *normal human being?* Would he be some kind of *weird* thing—a thing that had been changed by radiation?

Sinclair didn't like to dwell on that particular aspect. Deep down in his mind he was deciding that if the boy lived in some horrible, mutated form, the kindest thing for all concerned would be to let him 'accidentally' drown as he brought him up to the surface. He had no intention of bringing a monster back to grieving parents. The searchlight revealed a dark opening in the mud of the deep river

bank. The investigator caught his breath. This was what he had been looking for. It was a huge hole, quite large enough to admit the body of one of the gigantic beaver. It could be the home of the beaver, or it could be the point at which some subterranean stream joined the polluted water.

What was he to do?

There was a two-way radio attached to the helmet.

"This is Sinclair calling MacTavish."

"Are you all right?" The Scot sounded anxious, he must obviously have been listening closely for any word from the investigator.

"Perfectly—at the moment, thank you, Mac. I've found what appears to be the entrance to the beaver lodge. There's a huge hole in the side of the river here."

"Be careful now. Here, Mr. Colrayn wants to speak to ye."

"Hello, Barney. What's on your mind?" said Sinclair.

"Mac tells me you've found the opening."

"It's either that or the junction of the main stream and a subterranean tributary. Do you know of any subterranean tributaries?"

"None," answered Colrayn, "and believe me, we would know of one, if there was one."

"Then this is *it!* Wish me luck chaps, *I'm going in.*"

"Don't you think you should have taken a weapon of some sort? It's not too late to come back... get a spring gun, or something like that?"

"No, not on your life," said the adventurer. "It's just something extra to carry around. And the biggest and most powerful spring gun we've got would be a complete waste of time against these brutes. You'd need a depth charge to stop one or a really close shot with a forty-five. And by the time I'd let a depth charge off there wouldn't be enough of me to scrape out of the inside of the helmet."

"O.K. Please yourself," said his friend. "It's your neck and all that."

"I'm only too well aware of that," said Eddy. "I'm going into the opening now. I'll keep in contact."

He moved steadily forward into the cavernous, dark entrance. It was even darker there than it had been on the bed of the river, and the mud stirred up by his weighted boots made visibility practically nil. He was feeling his way along the side of the great lodge entrance, and became aware that he was moving upwards. He moved on, counting his paces carefully ten... twenty... thirty… and the water stopped being quite so dark. It was getting lighter with every movement, and he knew that he must be nearing the surface. The line trailing behind him seemed to weigh a ton, and he knew that that line was vitally important to his life and safety, and the life and safety of young O'Jordon—provided the lad still survived

Quite suddenly his head broke surface and he found himself in a gigantic and obviously artificial cavern. This was something the beavers had made. Here and there on the wall he could see the marks of claws and places where huge, spade-like tails had thumped the mud into the desired position.

He swiftly communicated his findings to the party waiting above.

"This is definitely it. It's a beaver lodge on a gigantic scale. Big enough to hold a barn dance in. And—and——" he broke off suddenly, overcome by excitement. *He could see a boy lying on the mud.* Whether the child was dead, or only asleep, he had no means of knowing.

"I can see the boy," he whispered hoarsely. "There are no signs of the beavers anywhere... I can see him lying on the mud. I don't know whether he's asleep or whether he's dead. I'm going to bring him back." He moved as swiftly as he could towards the recumbent body of the child. "He's not moving at all, even as I pick him up—wait a minute, his arms are flopping limp, I don't think he's dead, or if he is, he's only just died. Rigor mortis hasn't set in at any rate. There's certainly no sign of corruption. I can't take his pulse or

anything else with this outfit on. Anyway, I've got him, and I've got to come up fast. As soon as I get out of the entrance, I want you to haul up. You'd better stand by with oxygen and be ready to apply artificial respiration."

"We've got a spare oxygen cylinder ready," said the Scot, "ready for your suit. He can have that."

"I'll get a doctor," shouted Colrayn over the Scotsman's shoulder.

"Do that," replied Sinclair. "We're coming out *now*..."

As fast as the heavy suit would let him he struggled over the thirty paces separating him from the entrance to the beaver tunnel. As yet there had been no sign of the huge placental mammals, but as he reached the entrance to the tunnel he thought he saw a huge darker shape moving through the water. He couldn't be sure, and he certainly wasn't going to stop now to find out!

"Right! Pull me up!" he roared, and jerked on the line as an additional signal, as MacTavish had instructed him. The line went tight, and he clung fiercely to the boy, who still lay motionless in his arms. Colrayn had decided he'd better see them safely on the bank before he left to summon help, and he began applying artificial respiration, while MacTavish helped Sinclair out of his helmet. They applied oxygen, and after ten minutes the boy showed signs of recovery.

Sinclair was running the geiger counter over the outside of the suit.

"The outside of the suit has picked up a few traces, but nothing very heavy. Not even as much as that footprint. Which is surprising really—I thought the inside of the lodge would have been more heavily radio-active than the footprint itself."

"Aye, the inside of the lodge probably was," said the Scotsman, "on the other hand, the shielding on that suit is very thorough, it was the best we could do. Why I worked on that myself," he said with the pride of the Gaelic craftsman he was.

"Damn fine piece of work," said Sinclair. "I'll say that for you, Mac." He ran the geiger counter over the inside of the suit as he peeled out of it. There wasn't the faintest trace of radiation. "It's an exceptionally fine piece of work," he repeated. "Absolutely first-rate."

The boy was opening his eyes. He sat up and coughed some of the foul water out of his lungs. His eyes seemed unusually wide, the pupils dilated. He stared at them all rather uncertainly. Gradually the pupils began to resume a more normal size.

"He's been without light for days," said MacTavish, "it's a miracle he's not dead."

"There was enough air down there to have kept him going for weeks. I take it the brutes must have been feeding him. He doesn't look as though he's suffering from malnutrition."

"He must have been living on bark, and water plants and things of that kind…

The boy shook his head.

"They brought me bread and even cakes. They brought me a cup of tea," he said.

"They what!" exploded the investigator. "Brought you a cup of tea? And bread? And cakes? I'm going crazy! Something doesn't make sense." Then suddenly a fantastic theory leapt into life in his startled mind. "The teleportation and the telekinesis," he said. "That beaver that appeared in the middle of the vicarage tea-party. Cakes and cups of tea were being served. We checked on the ladies to see if anybody was hurt, but nobody bothered to count the cups and see if any were missing. If that thing could appear, and disappear, instantaneously it wouldn't have had to swim under the water. It would simply have willed itself out of the lodge, on to the vicarage lawn, and back into the lodge. As quickly as that. And there was a cup of tea, steaming hot. Hey presto. Still in its gigantic great paw."

"Stone the crows!" said Barney Colrayn.

"By St. Andrew," ejaculated the Scot. "That doesna' bear thinking aboot. Things as big as a hoose, that can appear and disappear at will. I've seen some strange things in my years with

salvage companies. I've seen barnacles growing on the skulls of the long dead... in sunken wrecks that have been there since the days of Francis Drake, but I've never seen a monster that could appear and disappear. Let alone carrying a cup o' tea. It'd be damn funny, if it wasn't so ruddy serious."

"It would indeed," agreed Sinclair. "I wonder... they haven't done the boy any harm... but *WHY* haven't they done the boy any harm? They've apparently treated him quite well, by their own lights and standards. But what was their purpose? What was their reason? Were they really trying to be friendly and establish contact with us? Are they trying out their new-found faculty and intelligence? Or is there something more sinister behind it? Did they take that boy down there in order to *study* him? Even a scientist who keeps an animal in a cage for vivisection and experiment has to feed the thing. Is that what they were doing? Were they keeping him there as a scientific specimen. And when he had finished his usefulness he would have been thrown away?"

The boy looked at them again.

"I feel funny," he said suddenly. "I feel very, very funny." His head dropped forward to his chest and he crumpled to the ground in an unconscious heap.

"Damn, I'd forgotten that radio-activity," said Sinclair.

The doctor, whom Colrayn had eventually summoned, had just arrived.

"Let me have the geiger counter," he said, and ran it swiftly over the boy's body. "By God," he whispered. "The child's radio-active. There's enough röntgens pumping out there to have killed an ordinary person long ago. There's something strange about this boy. Heaven alone knows what the radio-activity has done to him, despite the normality of his appearance." He shrugged his shoulders. "I am reminded of a strange case that took place in the U.S. many years ago. The whole affair was hushed up, but I happened to be a young, consultant prison surgeon out there at the time. I remember it very well. I don't suppose it's still on the security files, so there'll be no harm in my telling you. A man was convicted of murder and

sentenced to die in the chair. He received the normal dosage, and I came along and pronounced him dead. As far as I could tell he was dead. The body disappeared from the prison mortuary before we could dispose of it. Not very long afterwards there were strange tales of a hold-up man, who could knock his victims out at a single touch of his finger. Finally we caught up with him. It was the same man. *He hadn't been dead*, he had woken up in the mortuary and broken out. Yet he had received a shock of hundreds of thousands of volts. Quite enough to be more than fatal. Instead of killing him, that tremendous voltage had affected him in some uncanny way giving him the ability to emit a powerful electric shock at will. The State Governor reviewed his case, and rather on the principle that you don't hang a man more than three times in England, he got a twenty year stretch instead. He's probably been out for several years now. Apparently the power to emit an electric shock left him, and he became a perfectly ordinary human being again. But its a damnably queer business all the same. I'm just wondering whether anything of a parallel nature to that peculiar occurrence in the States has happened to this boy here. He has received far more than a lethal dose of radiation but he's not dead. He's emitting enough now to be dangerous to us"

"Well, what are we going to do?" asked Barney Colrayn.

"He'll have to be thoroughly washed and scrubbed, to get the radio active material off his body and clothing The clothing will have to be destroyed. The best thing will be to get rid of that first, and wrap the lad in a blanket." He was putting his suggestion into effect as he spoke. "And we shall have to have a damn good wash, as well. If we're quick about it, we shan't be in any serious danger."

They piled into the car and sped off towards the hospital, and as they drove, there was only one thought uppermost in Edward Sinclair's keen, intuitive mind. What had the radiation done to little Ricky O'Jordon?

CHAPTER NINE
Professor Brogan's Discovery

EDWARD SINCLAIR was a man of action. He did not believe in wasting time. He would not have wasted even a demi-semi-millionth of a second, and the thought of cooling his heels while waiting for a hospital report on the boy he had rescued was complete anathema to him.

He decided to follow up the lead which the old zoologist, Professor Septimus Harbottle, had given him and go and interview Jimmy Brogan. Accordingly, leaving a note for Barney Colrayn that he was to be notified of any further developments, he ran the car that was his pride and joy into the local garage for a swift check-up, and service, filled her up with high octane petrol and upper cylinder lubricant and made his way back to the metropolis.

He was lucky enough to find Jimmy Brogan at home, and anybody less like the man who had recommended him it would have been impossible to imagine.

At first sight Brogan reminded him of an Assyrian bull. He was a huge man—almost twice the size of the investigator, with a great barrel chest and a gigantic bullet head.

His age was very difficult to assess because, although there were lines of middle-aged maturity across the enormous face, and the wisdom of the ages in the deep, dark eyes, he had the crinkly black hair luxuriant growth of beard of a man who was still the right side of middle life. He had the hair and beard of a thirty-year-old, but the lines of wisdom and maturity stamped him as fifty at least. He was like one of those strange, mythical characters who are supposed to have discovered the secret of immortality, who, like the unfortunate Wandering Jew, live long beyond the allotted span of mortal man.

But the private investigator had no time to waste in idle, semi-metaphysical speculation. He had come to interview Brogan about

the problems that were troubling him, and Brogan's physical appearance, no matter what mystery it might hide, was only of very secondary importance.

The giant rose to meet him as his receptionist showed Sinclair into his study. They shook hands warmly and, strong man though he was, Sinclair winced in that powerful grip. For Jimmy Brogan had a hand-shake rather like a steel vice. Looking at the man Sinclair decided he would vote him the Number One Candidate in the list of people he would least like to fight. He made such muscular giants as Primo Carnera and Steeve Reeves seem comparatively normal in size.

He made the average middle weight look like a lightweight. He was colossal. He must have been nearly seven feet tall, but his shoulders were so broad as to make him look square, despite his colossal height. He had a Brobdingnagian expression. He was a walking Colossus, a Behemoth and, for the first time in his life, Sinclair found himself with something of an inferiority complex. For this was no brawny, muscle-bound pug. That great head could only have belonged to a near-genius.

"Very good of you to see me, Professor Brogan," said Sinclair. "I was given your name and address by one of your scientific colleagues, the eminent zoologist—"

Before he could finish, the giant began a deep chuckling laugh.

"Oh, he sent you, did he? Then you must be a pretty interesting character. If old Septimus sends anybody to me, they're worth seeing. I usually get the ones that he considers insoluble. What is your particularly imponderable quality, young fella?"

It was a long time since anybody had addressed Sinclair as 'young fella' but coming from this genial giant it didn't seem in the least offensive or patronising.

"Well, the position is this, I'm engaged on a security matter of the utmost importance."

The giant opened his desk and flicked an M.I.5 clearance card in front of the investigator.

"Shoot!" boomed that bull-like voice.

Sinclair heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness! That's going to save an awful lot of beating about the bush. Phoning up Home Secretaries and getting your credentials checked. Now you'd better see mine."

He flicked his own security card. The giant looked at it and nodded, and Sinclair replaced it in his wallet.

"Now then. Tell me all about it. Start at the beginning, don't leave anything out. I'm a stickler for details. I shall probably interrupt you a dozen times and be a thorough—going damn nuisance, but don't let it bother you. It's just my little way."

Sinclair was getting used to the size of his new acquaintance, and feeling rather more at ease than he had done when he first spotted Brogan, he began at the beginning.

"Well, a few days ago there was a sensational disappearance of a young boy. You probably read the case in the paper, Professor. His name was Rick O'Jordon."

"Oh, yes. I saw the case. Disappeared off a river bank. They'd been shooting radio active waste into that water, hadn't they?" The question stabbed out apropos nothing.

Sinclair rocked back in his chair as though he had received a physical blow.

"Why should you say that, professor?"

"Because in my mind the two things are probably linked. How long have they been throwing radio-active muck into that river?"

"You have certainly short circuited what I was going to say," said the investigator. "To answer your question, about fifteen or sixteen years."

"Crazy fools," replied Brogan. "They might have known they were asking for trouble. Do you know what happened to that kid? Either a gigantic fish leapt out and grabbed him, or an enormous water rat—something of that nature."

Again Sinclair rocked back, and the giant's twinkling eyes bored into his own.

"On the right track, am I? And you thought you were going to have a difficult job to convince me, eh? Probably thought I was going to be some reactionary old scientist who didn't believe in radio-active mutation, and dismissed you with, 'There-there-my-dear-fellow-you're-imagining-things.' Not on your life, my boy. I've been trying to convince the scientific world of the facts you're just going to tell me for a long, long time. Now you know that I not only believe you, I forestalled you, I'll hear your story."

"Right," said Sinclair. This was a man he liked, a man he could get on with. A man after his own heart. A man who was not only able to keep up with the investigator's line of thought but was actually ahead of it...

"The boy disappeared and a gigantic foot print was discovered on the river bank. I took a plaster cast of the print, and took it along to your friend the zoologist,

"I'm with you so far," said the giant.

"Well then," said Sinclair, "he told me it was probably an enormous beaver."

"Beaver eh? More interesting than rat or fish... there were giant species of beaver existent in the Pleistocene epoch," remarked the giant. "Trogontherium, to be precise, and of course, it's more likely that radio-activity would have caused an atavism rather than a direct forward mutation. But——" he thumped one gigantic fist into the palm of the other hand, "it might not have been a mere atavism. It might have been something—*different* as well."

"Those are almost the exact words that Septimus Harbottle used," replied the investigator, flabbergasted.

"Well, it's the obvious scientific conclusion. What's surprising in the fact that two scientists come up with the same answer to the same problem? No mystery to me there," said Brogan. "Why some of you laymen keep talking about scientific coincidence heaven above knows. Didn't you know great minds think alike, my boy?... They also say that small minds don't know enough to differ—which

of the two adages is true I don't know." The giant was chuckling again, making a joke against himself.

"I should definitely say the former in your case," said Sinclair with a smile. "As for there being other powers in the beaver besides the mutation, you're more than right there, sir."

"What else can the blighters do? Stand on their heads and play the national anthem on a tin whistle?"

"I wish that was all they could do," said Sinclair. "They also appear to have got hold of telepathy and telekinesis."

"What!" rumbled the giant. "Now you have shaken me. That's one of my experimental fields. I begin to see now why Harbottle sent you to me. This problem is even further in my field than I had imagined at the outset. Mutated beaver's pretty good. But mutated beavers that can telepath and teleport are really something. Now, let's get the facts straight. Clarify our minds in a clear field. We're faced with a polluted river—by the way, is there anything else in there? General toxins and effluent, I suppose. The usual muck these industrialists pour out."

"Steady on. Some of them are very careful and thorough, and the Sanitary Inspectors do their best."

"Oh, I know they do their best, but their hands are tied, poor little devils. Now if I had my way I'd start a Ministry of Hygiene. I think when I take over, I will." Again he grinned. "That's one of my little pipe dreams. I imagine myself as Prime Minister. Or better still, as world governor… and I really think what I'd do. I'd go to town. I'd turn the North and South Polar caps into gigantic food refrigerators, get rid of the starving millions in Asia…"

"Get rid of them! Obliterate them?"

"No! Get rid of the starving business. Do you realise there's enough seaweed floating down the North Sea at the moment that could be turned into protein—lovely slabs of protein, about the size of chocolate bars. It could be prepared very cheaply, and sent to feed the starving millions. There'd be no problem in Asia. But then, mankind isn't made that way. Mankind would rather blow itself up

than feed itself. We're strangely suicidal brutes, and we have the irony to laugh at the lemmings. Just because they jump into the sea. At least they know a quick, clean way to do the job. They don't poison themselves with radiation or starve themselves. Only man has got enough brain to do that," he said scathingly, "but I'm afraid I'm getting on my favourite political hobby horse, and that won't do, so away from the starving millions of the world's undernourished countries and back to the problem in hand. We've got a polluted river with not only radiation but toxins and factory effluent. How very, very pleasant. Phaugh!" He had a very expressive voice. Every monosyllable was vibrant with meaning. He was a fascinating man to listen to. His personality was electronic. Pulsating with power. Hard-boiled and cynical as he was in some respects, even Edward Sinclair was impressed and influenced by the gigantic scientist.

"Now then," said Brogan. "You were about to tell me more about evidence of telekinetic and teleporting qualities of these beavers."

"One of them appeared in the middle of the Ladies' Sewing Circle on the vicarage lawn."

The giant's laugh exploded like the roar of a volcano. "Well, blimey O'Riley!" he spluttered. "That beats hell, doesn't it?" He suddenly assumed a piping falsetto. "'Have another cup of tea, Mrs. Bloggs! ‘Oh isn’t that a nice pullover you're knitting, Mrs. Googleberry!' 'Have another biscuit, Mrs. Pofflewoffle!' And then, suddenly up in the middle of the lot pops a gigantic beaver, and gobbles the old dears up. Did it?" he asked hopefully.

"No," said Sinclair, rather lamely, "it didn't. It just popped up, took a cup of tea and some cake, and popped off again."

Again that explosive, volcanic laugh from the giant scientist.

"Oh, no! This is a flaming fraud. Are you sure you've got an M.I.5. warrant? I've got a good mind to throw you out. How would you prefer to go—through the door or through the window?"

"It's the honest truth," declared Eddy, laughing despite himself, for he had no wish to tangle with the giant. "And I warn you, that

big as you are if you try to throw me out you won't get an entirely bloodless victory."

"You're the first man who's ever dared speak to me like that," returned Brogan. "More power to your arm, sonny." He looked at Sinclair in a new light. "Yes, I suppose you're not giving more than ten stone away, are you?" Sinclair weighed between fourteen and fifteen stone.

"I don't suppose I am," replied the investigator. "You're probably so big you're muscle-bound."

The giant's only answer was another guffaw of laughter.

"Yes, you may be right at that. I don't get enough exercise. I used to wrestle with bulls at one time, but we ran out of bulls. And then the anti-blood sport people started finding fault with me, dammit. A man can't have any fun at all these days without somebody saying he's hurting the poor dumb animals. They won't even let me go hunting, not because of the foxes, but because they say I'm too hard on a horse. I tried strapping two together once, but I got cramp." He laughed again. "But we're wasting time, and this is serious. Do you honestly mean to tell me——" all the levity had gone from his voice, and it was ice cold and crystal clear. "Do you really mean to tell me that this beaver took a cup of tea and some cakes from a women's Sewing Circle meeting on the vicarage lawn?"

"That's exactly what happened, I assure you. I'm as sure of the facts as I am of the fact that I'm a human being and that I'm talking to you."

"Well, beggar me!" Suddenly he snapped his great fingers with a noise like a pistol going off. "The boy! They were feeding the boy. Right?"

The speed with which the giant could put facts together absolutely took Edward Sinclair's breath away. He nodded.

"I went and rescued the boy," he said. "Went down in a lead-shielded diving suit. Got the kid out of this gigantic beaver lodge under the river. He was not at all in bad shape, apart from the fact

that he was highly radioactive. I'm waiting for the hospital report on him now."

"Good for you," said Brogan. "I like to see a man with a bit of guts. Too few of them these days."

He lit a huge cigar and offered the box of gigantic, pungent weeds to the investigator. They were nearly as thick as the butt end of a billiard cue. Sinclair lit one rather dubiously: It tasted more like tarred rope than any tobacco he had ever smoked before. But he stuck it out manfully. If the giant could smoke them, then so could he. For size or no size, Eddy Sinclair was not the kind of man to admit that he could be beaten at anything.

As the air in the room rapidly became fouler and more acrid, the giant spoke again between puffs.

"So you got the kid out, you found that he was radio-active, and he's now in hospital and you're waiting the report." He was recapitulating swiftly.

And Sinclair got the impression that he was filing all the facts away in a kind of mental pigeon hole. "You've come to see me to see what I think about it, because old Harbottle told you that I was an off-trail subject.. "

"That's it exactly."

"That's just fine. It's the sort of thing I really like." He turned over the pages of his diary and then picked up the telephone.

"Miss Williams," he bellowed into the receiver. "I want you to cancel everything I've got for the next week at least. Find substitutes for the lectures where you can. If not, go yourself, and tell 'em I've got 'flu or collywobbly—anything you think of—I'm off on a security job. And I'm not coming back till it's finished."

"Certainly, sir." There was a note of resignation in the secretary's voice that was almost a dull apathy. It told the investigator that Brogan was in the habit of doing precisely what he wanted and saying 'to hell' with all his appointments. The secretary's voice told Sinclair that she had very often had to do this kind of thing for her enormous employer before.

"Got any sort of transport out there?"

"I think I can just about squeeze you into my car though it will take five miles an hour off the top speed,"

"Never mind. I don't care so long as it will still top the hundred," said the giant with a twinkling grin. "Can't bear to waste time, like to get from point A to point B in the minimum possible time."

"I'll do my best. Hold tight to your hat," said Eddy. "There's one thing, you'll weigh her down. She should hold the road nicely with you in the back."

"I'm worth three ordinary passengers and proud of it," retorted Brogan. "Come on, Tich, let's get into this Roaring Glory of yours and go and see where these radio-

active badgers are."

"Beavers," grinned Sinclair.

Then they were speeding back in a north-easterly direction wondering what they would find, and wondering what kind of report they would have on Ricky O'Jordon.

CHAPTER TEN
The Mutant

BROGAN, Barney Colrayn and Eddy Sinclair were talking to the hospital superintendent.

"We have been successful in removing all trace of external radio activity," said the doctor, "but we are rather worried about the boy. He doesn't appear to have suffered any ill effects physically at all. That in itself is a miracle."

"I jokingly refer to him as my 'Miracle Boy'" said Sinclair. "I had a hunch that he might be alive when I got him out."

"He certainly is a miracle boy—in every way——"said the consultant. "In the first place, anybody who has been exposed to that amount of radio-activity would normally die of radiation burn, but he hasn't got a scratch, a burn or a mark. He's completely unaffected in any way, as far as his physical well-being is concerned —but *something has happened to his mind*. He has the queerest delusions, and one or two rather strange things have happened. I can't really explain them. They are just little odd coincidences by themselves. For example, nurse went round to take the temperatures the other day. She has been with us for years, she is completely and absolutely reliable, the smallest detail of routine hospital work you can leave to her. She was taking temperatures and she went out of the ward, having left the thermometer in the boy's mouth. When she came back the thermometer had gone. She thought he was playing some youngster's prank.

"He said to her very solemnly, 'I put it back in the antiseptic, nurse'. She said, 'Don't be silly, you couldn't have done. I was on the other side of the ward, and I hadn't even read the temperature'. He said, 'Count them'. She did so, and it was back in the antiseptic. She recognised it, because she had had that one for several years."

Brogan and Sinclair exchanged glances. Barney Colrayn looked a trifle puzzled and the doctor proceeded to the next point.

"There were one or two little incidents like that. He wanted a magazine from the mobile library. The lady who hands them out was on the other side of the ward. When she got back to his bed, there was the magazine he had called to her for, on the table beside him."

"Perhaps he had nipped out of bed," said Brogan, before the doctor could start putting two and two together. This was after all a security matter. "I don't think it's anything to worry about. Childish tricks, I should think." "Some of these little beggars are very quick and nippy."

"Yes, that's probably it. Anyway, as far as I'm concerned he can be discharged as soon as you like," said the superintendent.

"Good," said Brogan. "Can we have a word with the young man?"

"Take him home with you now—I expect he'd like another ride in your car. Most lads do, and he comes from a family that will never be rich enough to own one. Nice people the O'Jordons—good, honest, working-class type. Take my hat off to anybody who can rear a brood that size successfully. Keep the little beggars clean and well-behaved. Got a good name in the locality. Nice family altogether. Some of those youngsters are quite smart, too. They'll do well for themselves..."

They took the boy home and Brogan and Sinclair had a long talk with the parents.

"I don't want to alarm you in any way, Mrs. O'Jordon," said the investigator, "but although Ricky is now perfectly well, and none the worse for his ordeal, the shock has disturbed his mind a little. We're not saying that he's deranged or anything like that, because he isn't, but it would be in the lad's own interest if we could keep him under observation for a few days."

"I don't see any reason why you shouldn't," said Mrs. O'Jordon. "Course I have missed him such a lot and we've been so worried about him...'

"Well, we shan't go very far away," said the professor, "and there'll be no reason at all why you can't come to see him every day, I do think though, that for his own safety—and if something is slightly wrong, for the safety of the younger children in the house... I do hope you understand we are only acting in the lad's best interests. He's been through a terrible ordeal and I don't want to say this and make you feel you're under any obligation, but you do realise that if it hadn't been for Mr. Sinclair's very courageous action in going down into that water, you'd never have seen the lad again—I don't want to stress that side of things, but I do feel that we have a certain claim to keep him under observation to find out anything that there may be to find out. This may possibly enable us to make a very valuable contribution towards medical knowledge of radio-activity and its effect on the human body. That is a specialised field of medicine in which I am very interested. You may or may not have heard I have written several books on the subject.

"I'm afraid I don't get much time for reading," said Mrs. O'Jordon, "not with the washing and the shopping."

"Yes—I expect you've got your hands pretty full," agreed the scientist. "I'd rather have my job than yours any day, I can tell you."

"'Oh, I wouldn't swap," said Mrs. O'Jordon. "It has its own reward, you know. There's a certain wonderful satisfaction in seeing them grow up. Well, what do you think, dear?"

"It's all right with me," said her husband, "if you're sure you don't mind, me dear."

"Well-in view of the fact that Mr. Sinclair was so kind——"

"We owe you a great deal," agreed the Irishman. "More than we can ever repay. As long as we can come and see the little lad, and you won't be wantin' to keep him too long…?"

"Oh, no! Only a matter of a few days. I just want to make absolutely sure that he's all right," said Brogan.

"Well, then, that'll be all right," said the O'Jordons. "That is if the lad himself doesn't mind—because I'm not havin' him taken away from his home if he doesn't want to go—he's been lonely

enough in that horrible place where you got him from, and in the hospital. I'll see what he says——"

Ricky was just a little doubtful at first, then the promise of a ride in the fabulous sports car seemed to be the deciding factor in his young mind.

"All right," he said brightly. "I don't mind, but it won't be for very long, will it?"

"As soon as you want to go home you say the word and you can. You only stay as long as you want to."

"I like your whiskers," said Ricky suddenly.

"I'll teach you how to grow a beard when you're a man. You have to start young and rub in a special magic mixture of salt and pepper," grinned the scientist.

"Gosh, do you really?" gasped Ricky.

Brogan had a way with children. They regarded him as a kind of young version of Father Christmas, and very soon the three of them were speeding towards Colrayn's apartment.

They were scarcely out of sight of the house when the boy turned to the men and said quietly: "Well, there's no need for any further pretence, is there?"

"Pretence?" asked Brogan in amazement. "What do you mean, son?"

"I know perfectly well why you and Mr. Sinclair want me to go and stay with you. You want to find out exactly what the radiation has done to my mind. Several interesting things have happened."

"Good heavens. How old are you, son?"

"Physically, I'm nine. Mentally I'm well in advance of either of you." He glanced swiftly up and down the road and said, "How about this."

Sinclair found that the car was no longer responding to the wheel. He swung it sharply left and right, and felt no movement.

"What the devil?" he began.

"You're six inches off the road," said the boy with a mischievous smile. "If you'll keep that wheel steady I'll replace the car."

So carefully that they scarcely felt the bump, the powerful sports landed back on the road.

"Then you didn't mean all those funny remarks about my beard, and saying, 'Oh, really' when I told you how to grow one, was just eye-wash to convince your parents?"

"Of course it was. All the time I was in hospital I had the devil of a job convincing those doctors I was just an ordinary little nine-year-old boy. Even then I forgot myself once or twice. I got thinking about something interesting. Abstract problems in metaphysics mainly, and I was working out a new variation of the quantum theory. I knew that nurse wanted the thermometer back, and I subconsciously put it back without thinking that I wasn't supposed to be able to. See what I mean? Same with that magazine. I was thinking about something else then. I realised I wanted the magazine, and I just casually reached out for it with my mind in the same way that you would casually reach out and pick it up with your hand. In the same way that a man stirs his tea subconsciously while he's reading his morning paper. It's very easy to forget yourself when you're a telepath."

"How did you know about those two incidents, then?" exploded Brogan incredulously.

"How did I know that you knew? I read your mind, of course."

"You read my mind? Telepathy, just like that?" said the professor.

"Yes, I know exactly what you're all going to do. I know what you're all thinking."

"But doesn't it confuse you—picking up three sets of thoughts at once?"

"It doesn't confuse you to read three words one after the other, or three figures simultaneously. If I put the numbers one, two and three in front of you, you could glance at them simultaneously and

tell me that the answer was six if they were all added. Your minds are so small in comparison with my own that I could tell you what the three of you were thinking about, and most of what you've ever remembered."

"Heavens above!" ejaculated Brogan, "and to think that a few days ago you were a nine-year-old schoolboy."

"Life is measured not so much in age as in experience," said the lad, "and it wasn't just the radio activity that did it. It was being in contact with other, gigantic minds that did it. You see, those beavers are not just atavistic"—he was using technical terminology as though it was the simplest of A.B.C. Primers—"they have developed special mental powers, and anybody in contact with them for any length of time develops similar mental powers. About the nearest analogy I can get is that of putting a piece of soft iron near a magnet—it picks up the magnetism... you understand this?"

"Yes, thank you," replied Brogan with a rather hurt little smile. "I'm not a complete nit-wit, you know, even if you are a genius, young man."

The boy smiled.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound patronising. Even though I can read your minds I get the feeling that I ought to stop and explain my terms. My mind is racing so far ahead that I feel I'm not making sense to you sometimes. And there's been this awful bind of having to pretend I was a little boy..."

CHAPTER ELEVEN
Attack!

THERE were three of them in the barge. The old bargee, the hired hand and his wife. It was an ancient craft and had been plying its trade for many years along the canals of England. The canals and the rivers. The old man knew every inch of the now largely neglected inland waterways as surely as he knew the back of his own hand. The barge and the canal and the cargo were his life. The familiar Roses and Castles were his environment. The narrow boats were the only home he had ever known. He came from a long line of bargemen. He was proud of his profession, but at the same time sad. He was melancholy to think that it was a dying profession, and that newer, less picturesque forms of transport were killing the fascinating old trade, slowly but irrevocably.

He had carried many cargoes in his time. Everything from wheat to winkles; from pig-iron to plastics. But he knew, despite a superficial optimism that was characteristic of his race, that another hundred years would see the end of barging to all practical intents and purposes.

The old bargee lit his pipe and spoke quietly and rather sadly to his hired hand.

"Times are changin' John, times are changin'."

"Aye, Billy, that they are," returned John. He looked towards the long, narrow, dark stretch of water.

"I bin doin' a lot o' readin' lately," said Billy. "Bin readin' about barges. I'd like to have written something meself, but never did have the education to do that sort of thing..."

"They did say, years ago," said the hired hand, "that the name 'barge' was used for any small sailing vessel, and then that was used for flat bottomed boats for carrying goods on inland waterways."

"Ah, there are barges and barges," said John with great wisdom. "I mind the times when there was old tow barges, everywhere old tow barges, but nowadays it's all engines, engines, engines... Mind the time when we bin on the ol' tidal rivers wi' mast and sail?"

"Aye, that I do," agreed Billy. "Those were the days on the old dumb barges, when we used to just drift down with the current, a long oar at the back. They were good, the old dumb barges. You worked on the lighters one time, didn't you?"

"Aye, I bin on the lighters," said Billy, "we used them to load and unload the cargoes on ships in the harbours. I bin a lighter-man."

"Where do they get the name 'lighter' from?" asked the other.

"That's a funny thing you should ask that," replied Bill, "I was readin' that in a book the other day. Apparently that come from a verb, whatever a verb is."

"I remember my old schoolmaster tellin' me that That's a doin' word. Like 'run' and 'jump'—that's about the only thing I did remember from school. I left when I were twelve year old."

"That ha'n't done us no harm, either," said Billy, "so did I—all this education! Lot o' money wasted I think. What was good enough for us ought to be good enough for the children to-day. Times are changin', things aren't what they wuz!"

"No, that they aren't. What about this word 'lighter' then?"

"Well, it came from the verb 'to light' and that mean 'to relieve of a load' so they say in the book."

"Course, all barges don't do this sort of work, do they?"

"No, that they don't. You think of the State barges, there's an honour for you if you like. Highly ornamented they are, full o' passengers on these big State ceremonials, and I do hear that at Oxford—coo, we bin through there some number o' times—these here houseboats moored on the river what the college rowin' clubs use, they're called the college 'barges'."

"Yes, I heard that too," said his friend.

They smoked and stared at the water for a long time.

"There's a lot of facts in the book about bargin' in England and overseas. Surprisin' you know, when you read about them. T'ain't the same as doin' the job."

"Theory and practice, theory and practice," said John, "boy, there's a world of difference. A world o'difference. Over forty different canals there are in the United Kingdom, and they've all got locks o' different sizes. So the barges have to be built o' different sizes to navigate 'em you know."

"Aye, that they do! It's a great craft, a skilled craft. Anything from twenty ton up to sixty ton, the barges can go."

"You know, I think we did wrong years ago, when we didn't standardise the locks. They did overseas you know—France and Belgium. They take things by canal a lot cheaper than they can here. All the locks are the same size. They can take barges up to 260 ton, 280 ton, and go all the way down to the ports."

"I long for the good old days," said John. "I do that. When they used to tow by horses. Ay, that's a by-gone time, but that was a peaceful, quiet time. There was a bit o' soothing magic about the old rivers and canals then. Now its all steam and motor tugs, and the old barges wi' semi-diesels, towing two or three in a chain behind. Oh, that isn't the same. Not the same."

"Course that's wonderful how they're built," said Billy thoughtfully. "You notice the design, barges and lighters are the same. As large a hatch cover as they can manage, as small a deck area as possible, so they save the cupboard space under the deck down in the hold, and make it quick and easy to handle. Down on the Thames we used to get up to three hundred ton you know. I have been on one four hundred ton and more..."

"Coo, that's a size," said his friend.

"I was on the Humber a lot o' years ago, and they don't go above two-twenty ton up there. Some o' the little 'uns only sixty, and the others all sizes, in between."

"You talk about the really big 'uns," said Billy, "when I was abroad in the first world war I was at Antwerp and Rotterdam, round the rivers and docks there; I seen some monsters up there. I said to one o' the old fellas—cos I managed to pick up a bit o' the lingo, you did during the war——"

"I remember that well."

"They had some there up to three thousand tons. I couldn't hardly believe it—but the old boy said that was so, and when I looked at some of 'em and paced out one or two, he was right."

"Course, the bigger they are the cheaper the transport is," said Tom. "Stand to reason, common sense ain't it."

"They're much lighter than the English barges though, they're always afloat. They don't have to be so strong as the English craft. 'Course, you very often have to load and unload while you're lyin' aground..."

"Talkin' about the old Thames barges," said Tom. "They're always what we call swim-ended, they're a separate pattern by themselves."

"Oh, you mean 'swim' so they glide."

"That's right. The bottom o' the lighter, she turns up fore and aft and meets the deck at an angle, making the forrard swim and the after swim. And there's a budget, a fixed rudder, on the after swim and that's worked down the centre."

"Ah, yes, I know what you mean," said Billy, "that's formed through the continuation of the keel plate. The far end of the swim—and that's filled in up to the swim, yes, I seen 'em. I worked on 'em. I know all about them. You can't tell me nothin' about them. Course, they got a lot o' rules and regulations down there, hadn't they?"

"Yes, that they have," said John. "you mustn't tow no more'n six, two abreast, though I can't see the need for that. We got too many rules and regulations these days, that's the trouble."

"But then you know," said Billy, "A barge owner like a ship owner, he's got to make his vessel suit the trade o' the time. Why, I mind the time when I was down in the Port o' London, we used to

have insulated craft, we'd carry meat and butter and fruit, and all them sort o' things. We'd take 'em out of the refrigerators in the steamers. And there'd be the other type, the old tank barges. They'd carry spirit and liquids o' various kinds, then you come across all the rules and regulations again. You have to go past the Lloyds classification, and you have to be built up to the standard o' the Port o' London Authority. I bin on tank craft with vegetable oil compartments. I've carried coconut and palm kernel oil, they go solid when they're cold—we used to have steam coils round there to heat the oil and then pump it out, and you get rid of it, dischargin' it. We used to use the same method when we were carryin' heavy fuel oil and lubricatin' oil 'cos that'd go cold like vaseline. You couldn't get it out then. Goes hard like axle grease. When we carried anything that's got duty payable on it, oh, there was trouble then. Had to lock the hatches and go and be passed by the Customs and Licence authorities... that was a job, that was." Old Billy was puffing at his pipe.

"Ha' you ever noticed—I suppose you must ha' done, John," he went on, "those Thames-built wooden barges, lighters and sailin' barges, both, there's one thing about them that you don't find in the other builds—her plank seams are always rabbeted. They have overlap planks, they never have to be caulked."

"Aye, those old wooden barges were good," said John, "but there's steel barges comin' in now, and the wooden barge is becomin' a thing o' the past—more's the pity. I mind when I was on one of the Humber keels—"

"What do you mean exactly by a 'keel'? The word's slipped my mind for a minute..."

"Well, they were the big sailin' barges fitted with square sails."

"Oh, blast yes, course they are," said the other bargeman. "You have the sloops up there on the Humber too, don't you? They're fitted with mainsail and foresail. Sloops and Barges, we used no end o' them up there. They're all fitted out with the lee boards just the same as the sailing barges on the Thames. Course, you know, before the war you got a lot o' those Humber barges, they were

bigger than the sloops, and they were ketch rigged. We used to work up and down the East coast seaports on them. I was only a lad, we called 'em 'billy boys', but I don't see many o' them about now."

"No, that's all the Thames coasting barges now," said Bill. "I used to like the old 'billy boys' they were good old barges. Course, I still think the most interestin' is the old Thames sailin' barge, even though the 'billy boy' was a good boat," said John. "There's two kinds, there's the old river barge from 180 ton down, and there's the coastal barge that'll go up to 300 tons. Many's the time I've plied between Maidstone and Chatham. I've been through Faversham and Sittingbourne. I've been to London from Southend on the Thames, down the estuary..."

"I've been on coastin' barges, too," said Billy.

"So've I," said John, as though not to be outdone. "From London to the East and South coast ports, and I've been to all the closest continental ports. I've been to Holland and Belgium, I've even been to the Channel Islands—in one o' them. Yep, the coasting barges have taken the place of the schooner and the ketch on those trade routes. They say there're cheaper to work. They don't take so many hands, that's one thing."

"That stands to common sense, Billy," agreed John. "You can work a 300 ton barge with only four hands, where you want six or seven on a schooner."

"And o' course, you can make a light passage without botherin' about the ballast," said Billy. "The schooner can't do that. And there's another thing, too, about the coastal barge—she only draws two or three feet o' water, less than a schooner—that means you can get her into a shallow berth."

"That saves all the transhipment costs. You don't have to put into the smaller lighters. That saves all the extra handling of the goods. Savin' in time is a savin' in money, I always say."

"You're right there," agreed John, "you're absolutely right."

"One thing I like about the old coastin' barges," said Bill, "is the way they're sprit-sail rigged, like a river barge, but you know, the old river barges carry 'a mainsail, topsail, foresail, a mizzen and a flyin' jib—whereas the coastin' barge is rigged with a bowsprit, so that she can carry bowsprit jibs of various sizes, and she can change 'em about, dependent on the weather.

"Those old coastin' barges also carry square sails and balloon foresails when they're runnin' before the wind. It's surprising how well they can get over the water sometimes."

Suddenly their peaceful, nautical conversation was interrupted.

"What the hell is that comin' up out o' the water up ahead of us?" gasped John. "Han't had no warnin' about a wreck submerged in the river, have you?"

"Not a thing," said Bill.

"Well, look again," said John.

"Lucy," called Bill. "Come and have a look at this, old beauty." He was already slackening speed. "Look at this here up ahead on us. What do you make on it?"

It was growing dusk and it was difficult to see exactly what the obstruction was. But it was as though something about the size of a big haystack had reared itself up in the water.

"I can't make it out," said Lucy, "I jus' bin doin' some mending. I got me wrong glasses on, boy."

"It seems to be comin' closer," said Bill. "If we were out at sea I'd say we were seein' some kind o' sea monster. But we're not, we're in a blinkin' river. Miles from the coast. That's definitely movin'."

"Yes, that that is, and that's comin' closer." There was anxiety in his voice. Anxiety... and fear. Lucy had found her right glasses, and was peering intently through the gloom. Suddenly she began to scream.

"It's something alive, Bill! It's something alive! It's like an enormous rat."

"Can't be. Not that size," gasped Bill. "By God, we're all sober, aren't we?"

"We're all seein' it," said John. "That's no dream. That's no illusion. Whatever it is, it's as real and horrible as ever it can be. Look out." But his warning came too late.

A gigantic paw crashed down on to the barge and pushed the narrow boat's prow under the water. The hatches were open, and in a matter of minutes the hold began to fill.

With despairing cries the three old river gypsies found themselves plunged into the water. None of them—despite their years on the aqueous element—could swim. A few minutes later it was all over. And three still, dark forms moved slowly with the current. The barge itself had disappeared beneath the turgid waters.

The three old water folk had gone to that place 'where there is no more sea' and where the only river is the crystal 'river of life'…

The gigantic beaver reared itself up to its full height and splashed angrily out of the water. Its eyes gleamed with intrinsic hatred, and like a lurching, lumbering, rather ungainly Colossus, like some kind of hideous, silky-grey juggernaut, it made its way out of the water and towards the nearest lighted cottage.

It was a lock-keeper's cottage and the keeper and his family were sitting quietly watching television. A huge, flat tail came down on the roof, and a great shower of plaster descended like a thousand demons erupting.

"What the devil?" gasped the lock-keeper. "Sounds like an air-raid."

The electricity failed. The television picture receded madly down the tube and went out. They sat in the darkness, the old man, his wife and his daughter, waiting... wondering what would happen next. The great tail descended again, and the cottage began to collapse around them.

Only the younger woman escaped, and as she saw the gigantic, shadowy figure outside, she screamed in terrified disbelief.

But her terror was not of the paralytic variety. She retained the use of her legs—and she ran! She ran as though all the devils in hell were after her. She ran until she came to the nearest light, the nearest sign of human habitation. There she panted out her story to incredulous neighbours. They looked through the window and saw the thing that lumbered towards them. Taller than the house. Broader than a haystack. Huge! Horrible! Terrifying! With eyes filled with blazing hatred. A gigantic beaver, a thing like something out of the very worst nightmare. They saw it while it was still fifty or a hundred yards away, in the gloom, and they reached for the phone.

"Police!" screamed the neighbour in terror. "Police! Help! We're being attacked. We're being attacked by a gigantic beaver!"

CHAPER TWELVE
Brogan’s Discoveries

BROGAN, Sinclair, Colrayn and the miracle boy were comfortably installed in Colrayn's living room.

"Let's get straight down to brass tacks," said Brogan. "Do you mind if I give you one of the basic intelligence tests, young fella? I've no doubt that you'll absolutely rocket through the blasted thing, it will probably be a waste of time. But I want some kind of scale to work on."

"Certainly," said young O'Jordon.

Brogan unstrapped his brief case and produced a sheaf of papers.

"Let me explain, before I start exactly what I understand by the value and meaning of an intelligence test," he said. "It's simply an instrument to measure the amount of intelligence shown by a human being—or an animal. It is basically a series of questions that have to be answered or directions that have to be followed. Things that have to be learned—shall we say intellectual tasks of any sort which require to be performed. Intelligence, or intellect, is usually defined as the ability to perform intellectual tasks. Does that make sense?"

"Very simple sense—yes," answered O'Jordon. "It's very incomplete, you know, but as a working hypothesis it's not bad."

Even though they had seen this child in action the very super-human genius of his intelligence shook them. "I would prefer to say," went on the nine-year-old lad, "that an intelligence test is a specially instructive sampling of tasks of the kind that you have just mentioned."

Brogan gulped.

"O.K." he said. "Let's start. Can you tell me the difference between laziness and idleness?"

"The former is usually voluntary, and the latter may occasionally be enforced. One is a state of mind—the other is a state of body. Does that satisfy the question? There are, of course, subtle shades of definition..."

"Oh, that's fine, that's just fine!" replied Brogan. "Now the difference between evolution and revolution?"

"Evolution is slow, gradual, directive change," said the boy. "Revolution I would describe as a complete reversal—a rapid and usually a violent change. I'm afraid my vocabulary isn't all it might be. I haven't had the opportunity of acquiring all the words I want as yet..."

"You've acquired plenty," said Brogan. "Full score so far. Now, the difference between poverty and misery?"

"Oh, poverty is simply the state of being impecunious—without money—and without the attributes to healthy, happy living, that money can produce. Misery is the opposite of happiness. A man can be rich and miserable, but a man can't enjoy riches and poverty at the same time. Is that a clear enough distinction?"

Again Brogan swallowed hard It took something to shake Brogan but this kid certainly did. "Right—the last in this series—the difference between character and reputation, please?"

The boy hesitated just for a second... "I wish I wasn't so darn short on vocabulary," he said, just a trifle petulantly. "I haven't had the opportunity yet. I want to get hold of some more words. Words are the tools... upon which intellect grows. Character I would say, is that which singles out the individuality of a human being. Reputation is that which a man is reputed—or said—to have done. Character is a fact. Reputation is hearsay."

"Yes—that's fair enough," agreed Brogan. He made some ticks on the paper in front of him.

"What's the score so far?" asked the boy.

"For a lad of nine, absolutely phenomenal," said the professor. "Now, this is a little process which we call 'repeating three digits'. Let me explain a little and give you a chance to practise…"

"No need," said O'Jordon. "I'm entirely with you. You want me to say something like 6,4,1... 2,5,3... 8,3,7. Is that it? And if I am able to repeat one out of three without error, then I am considered to have passed. Is that the sort of thing? I can imagine it is by presupposing a parallel upon what you have already given me in the way of a literary word-association test."

"I don't think we'll try that simple digit test. Let's try six digits reversed. Just listen to these carefully—4,7,1,9,5,1. That's the first. 5, 8, 3, 2, 9, 4, 2, 7, 5, 2, 6, 3, 8."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Repeat one of those three series."

"Is that all?" asked the boy with a laugh. "4,7,1,9,5,2," he paused; "5, 8, 3, 2, 9, 4. 7, 5, 2, 6, 3, 8. Is that all you wanted?"

"You've just passed the test three times over," said Brogan with a rather hollow laugh "It almost is an insult to ask you this one, but I think I will. Tom runs faster than Jim; Jack runs slower than Jim; which is the slowest of the three?"

"Jack," said the boy. "Is that a question?" He sounded genuinely surprised.

"It was a question," said Brogan. "Surprising how many people get it wrong, too. Excuse me while I do a little bit of calculating."

"What are you working out now?" asked the lad.

"Well I'm trying to work out your intelligence quotient—your I.Q. as it's known—subject to certain limitations the score is expressed in terms of mental age. That means the average age at which an average child is able to attain it. Let's call a boy Bill Smith —now, Bill Smith, whose age is twelve, scores 118 in the examination, and if the average child of thirteen point one is able to score 118 in the same examination, then Bill Smith is said to have a mental age of thirteen point one years, even though he's physically only twelve. And his intelligence quotient—or his I.Q .—is his mental age multiplied by a hundred, divided by his chronological age, that is, 13.1×100÷12."

"Which is 109," said the boy before Brogan had finished speaking.

"Is it?" asked Brogan, and scribbled rapidly. "Yes, by cracky, it is," he said. "I think I'd better add another word of explanation—this form of stating an I.Q. is only of use to individuals whose scores are not higher than those made by an average child of, shall we say, fourteen or fifteen, and whose chronological age is not more than eighteen."

"Yes, I can understand that in the higher levels of intelligence the method is almost without value," said the nine-year-old almost patronisingly. "You didn't ask me anything that was not most elementary, my dear professor."

"Help!" said Brogan weakly.

"Surely there must be some other way of expressing the score," said the boy thoughtfully. "Couldn't you, for example, take a percentage of some defined group who would attain lower scores? For example, if sixty per cent of persons aged 12 scored lower than 118, and forty per cent scored higher in some national examination, then your mythical Bill Smith could be recorded as being in the 71st percentile for his age, of course, his chronological age. Such a method would be more suitable for adult intelligence measurement, wouldn't it?"

"Such a method is in use," said Brogan. "Had you heard of it?"

"No, I just worked it out," said the lad.

"I just don't know what to say about you," commented Brogan. He looked helplessly from Colrayn to Sinclair and back again.

"Of course, you could refine the measure a bit more," said the boy, enthusiastically, "and you could express an individual score as a plus or minus deviation from the average for some defined group. You could work it out in terms of the variability of that group as a unit."

"Yes—I suppose you could," said Brogan faintly. He made some more rapid pencil calculations. "Well, against any nine-year-old your

I.Q. is phenomenal. It's well above the genius rating. I put it at 200 and plus."

"It's very nice of you," said the lad, "I take that as quite complimentary, but what does it mean? That I have brain twice the normal nine-year-old standard? That gives me a mental age of 18. That isn't very impressive. You're more than 18, aren't you?"

"Yes! But as I was saying these tests are——"

"I know, I know," said the boy. "Look, just let me have this sheaf of papers a moment." He took them from the professor's hands. Brogan was shocked into a state of dull apathy. The boy was as great a mental giant as Brogan was a physical giant. More so. Much more so.

"Now then," said the lad, "let's just run down these questions, you gentlemen are quite intelligent individuals." He looked at them keenly, searchingly. "You, Mr. Brogan are a few points ahead of Mr. Sinclair, and Mr. Sinclair is a few points ahead of Mr. Colrayn. No offence, Mr. Colrayn."

"Oh, not at all," said Colrayn. "I feel like something from the bottom of an 'E' stream in a very large Secondary Modern, compared to you."

"And yet, as a professional man, you would in all modesty admit you are well above the average for the country, sir? When you compare yourself with non-skilled personnel and average run-of-the-mill people?"

"I suppose I may be a little above average," agreed Colrayn, "but I'm nothing very special."

"You're just being too modest," said the boy. "You're above average. Sinclair is more than above average, and Brogan, definitely in the upper ten per cent."

"That's kind of you," said Brogan. "Especially when I think of how far behind you leave me when you really get going."

"Tch, tch, tch." said the boy. "This modesty is no use at all. It won't get us anywhere. And none of you mean it. Now, just to give you some idea of how my intelligence rating compares with that of

the normal human being. I suggest that you three gentlemen work as a team on this series of questions and I will take a duplicate copy and we will take the time factor into consideration... I will go over to the other side of the room and work through till I have finished. When I have finished, you gentlemen must stop as well. You will have the advantage of working as a three to one team."

"Yes, I see the point of that," said Brogan. "O.K., son, we'll do that."

The boy worked for seven minutes in silence.

"Finished," he called.

"What?" cried Brogan. "Dammit lad, we've only done twenty-nine. You've finished a hundred?"

"Yes," said young O'Jordon with a twinkle in his eye, "shouldn't I have done?"

"This beats the band," said Sinclair, "I've never come across anything like this in the whole of my singularly wide and varied career."

"Neither have I," said Brogan.

"Nor me. Though I would hardly have expected to in a mundane occupation like mine," said Barney Colrayn.

"Well, let's see if you've got 'em right," Brogan crossed over to the boy and flipped the sheet over to the answer side. The lad ran his eyes swiftly over them. He seemed to be able to assimilate a vast amount of knowledge in a remarkably short space of time.

"All correct," he said quietly.

"You checked that lot in 12 seconds," gasped Brogan. "How do you know you're right?"

"I just know," said the boy. "That's all!"

"You'd better check ours, then."

"Four wrong out of twenty-nine," said Young Ricky five seconds later. He jabbed his finger on them swiftly. "Here, the speed of the train is 27.3 miles an hour, not 28.2 which you gentlemen have arrived at. And in this one the position of the ball, which was thrown

into the field at an angle of 45.2 degrees, with a wind speed of 40 miles an hour, would have been at this point on the diagram, not at that point. The third one…"

"All right, all right, all right, I believe you," said Brogan. "Let's not waste any more time. We'll take your results as final. So we scored 25 and you've scored a hundred, in seven minutes, which means that you are at least four times as intelligent..."

"Don't forget there were three of you working on it," said the lad, "even assuming that not all of you are being employed to the full, let's divide your result by two, shall we?"

"Which means that you're between 8 and 10 times as intelligent as the average human being," said Brogan, and something like fear began to show on the giant scientist's face. "A genius I could understand, yes, but this isn't genius, this is superman. This is something so far ahead of humanity, that you aren't really human in the same sense that we are."

"I think I am," said the boy. "Think of the difference between a helpless baby and a fully trained athlete, in the prime of life. There's a colossal difference there, yet both are human beings..."

"Yes, I agree," said the professor. "I begin to see your meaning, young man, both are perfect, true human beings, and yet the differences between them are enormous. Just because your intellect is as far ahead of us as the physical prowess of an athlete is ahead of the physical prowess of a new born baby... it doesn't mean that the athlete isn't human. You've got a good point there, lad. I admit I was frightened."

"Yes, I know you were. I can read your mind," said the boy. "You're all rather afraid of me. But there's no need to be. I'm not planning to take over the world or anything like that."

"It's a good thing you're not," said Sinclair. "I can't see any way of stopping you."

"Don't try," said the boy. "I should be sorry to have to do anything to hurt you. You were wondering just then if you could, if necessary, if I was a danger, draw your gun and shoot me. In the

first place you wouldn't have the heart to because you know that I am by no means evil, and in the second place, well, here—don't use the gun in case there's an accident, but have a piece of wood in your pocket." He picked up a small carved oak candle- stick and passed it to Sinclair. "Pretend that's a gun, draw it and shoot me..."

Sinclair was unable to move his right hand. He tried to swing his left round to the pocket that held the carved candlestick... without any success. Suddenly he found himself flying up into the air, and he hovered, head down, five feet above the ground, as stiff and as hard as a board. He dropped a couple of feet and stopped suddenly.

"If I'd wanted to," said the boy. "I could have dropped you on your head, so it wouldn't be any use pulling a gun on me would it? Or to try and do it secretly. You see I know even the thoughts that you try to cloak. I can read your minds as easily as I can see what you're doing. I can see your thoughts. Though 'see' isn't quite the right word to use. I can't get over this beastly vocabulary difficulty yet. There just aren't any words in this rather limited language to describe the words I want to describe.'

The detective regained his feet.

"You are certainly a problem," he said, "but look, suppose it was a case of national emergency, could you stop an atom bomb from exploding in the same way that you could stop me?"

"Yes," said O'Jordon simply. "I could! I could simply 'will' it not to explode."

"Good heavens," said Brogan. "Let's try that on a small scale. Stopping a perfectly natural process. Something like a match for instance. If I strike a match on the surface of the box, can you stop it from igniting?"

"Yes, I could. Try it!"

For a full five minutes the three of them rubbed matches vigorously against the sides of the box. Nothing happened.

"Now hold them away from the box," said the boy. They did so obediently, and immediately all three matches sprang to light.

"Wow; I've seen just about enough for this session. There are some serious things we must do. You are on our side against these beavers aren't you?"

"Of course," said the boy. "They constitute a very serious threat to humanity. They must be stopped at once. I will be glad to co-operate with you in any way I can."

"That's a relief anyway," said Brogan. "It isn't so bad having a superman about the place, provided he's on our side. It will be a decided asset!"

"I'm glad you see it that way," said the boy. "But of course I can't say that the rest of the world will. May I take it that this will remain a secret between the four of us? Have I your solemn promise that nobody apart from ourselves will know that I am anything other than a perfectly ordinary little boy?"

"You have my word," said Brogan.

"And mine," echoed Sinclair.

"You can count me in," said Colrayn.

He looked at them rather searchingly for a moment.

"Yes, I know I can. Thank you." His face took on a sad, rather wistful expression. "If I wasn't able to trust you implicitly I'm afraid I would have to have killed you all.

"Good Lord," said Sinclair, "do you mean that?"

"I would be very, very sorry to have had to have done so, but I couldn't have had my secret exposed, now could I? I wouldn't have liked to have had the rest of the world against me. I don't want to spend the rest of my life as a lonely superman. I want to live as a normal human being. I am hoping that when the present emergency is over I can practically forget that I have powers above the average. I shall want to use my intellect, but only within the limits of normal human capacity. Things in the super intellect bracket I shall only do to amuse myself, as a hobby."

Brogan was astounded at the intellect that was pouring from the miracle boy.

"I have been thinking, while we have been talking, and I believe I have found a solution to our problem..."

"Go ahead," said Brogan, "I'm all ears."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
The Electronic Weapon

THE miracle boy was sketching diagrams and complicated mathematical symbology on to a sheet of paper which Barney Colrayn had provided.

"The whole basis of the problem is this, anything which the human brain—or come to that, any physical animal brain—can produce, can be emulated artificially by a series of valves, relays, and electronic reactor cells. You are, of course, aware of that fact."

"We are," agreed Brogan.

"Speak for yourself," said Colrayn. "I'm just going to listen and clap politely when somebody says something clever."

"You're going to have quite a bit of clapping to do when this kid gets started," said Brogan. "believe me, Barney."

"Well, now," said the boy, ignoring the interruption, the powers of teleportation, telekinesis and telepathy must obviously also, because they are products of a physical brain, be repeatable by electronic means... It's just a matter of tracing out the necessary circuit and working out the appropriate formula. Now, provided a thing can be done electronically, it can also be stopped electronically. Is that clear?"

Brogan was nodding.

"I'm not speaking of my own powers, because I don't mind whether humanity has the power to stop me or not, because I don't particularly intend to use them, after we have got over this beaver crisis. Because I myself am endowed with the same qualities these beavers have, then I myself can be the test case for producing a shield against those powers. The problem that confronts us is two-fold. First of all we have to find the basic electronic patterns which will most closely emulate the basic faculties which I believe you refer

to as E.S.P.—I mean the things that I can do... telepathy, teleportation, telekinesis."

"Right," said Brogan.

"Now, having discovered an electronic parallel to those faculties, we must find some way of rendering the electronic parallel harmless."

Again Brogan nodded.

"I'm with you, me boy. Slightly behind you, but I'm ploughing along gallantly in your wake... You make me feel like an old coaster trying to keep up with Campbell's Bluebird."

"I do like your compliments," smiled the boy, "they're rather quaint. I am not without my conceit, but as the most intelligent man in the world, I'm entitled to a little."

"You certainly are," agreed Brogan. "After all, as C. S. Lewis once said, 'True humility does not consist in great men thinking themselves nothing, or intelligent men thinking themselves fools, or strong men thinking themselves weak... it consists in the ability to build the greatest cathedral in the world, to know it to be the best, and yet to be no more or less pleased than if somebody else had done it."

"That's quite a good thought," said the boy, "a little primitive, perhaps, a little simple, but nevertheless, a good thought."

"C.S. Lewis is a good man, and by human standards an exceptionally intelligent man," said Brogan. "It sounds strange to hear you saying that a sublime thought like that is 'simple'."

"All human thought—at least all human thought I have encountered so far—is simple to me," said the boy. "It makes me feel as thought I were a grown man—a University Professor, perhaps—who has been condemned to spend the rest of his life with no other company than that of a kindergarten class."

"Yes, I can imagine how I would feel in those circumstances," said Brogan "I should probably go stark, raving mad."

"I shan't do that," said the boy. "The higher the intellect the less chance there is of it becoming unbalanced. All this guff—I can

already see the thought in your mind—about genius and insanity being opposite sides of a thin borderline, is not true, you know. The unbalanced mind is usually a rather crude and primitive arrangement. A finely-made machine doesn’t go off balance. But the cave man’s crudely constructed first wheel was very likely to have an eccentric axle."

"By the time I get to the bottom of your similes you have passed on to the next one," said Brogan rather sadly. "You go so darn fast, I’m afraid of missing something."

"Sorry," said the lad, "I'll slow down a bit."

"No, don't let me be a spanner in the works, you just carry on," said Brogan. "I'll keep wallowing along in the rear."

"You've left me already," said Colrayn.

"I'm practically out of sight," said Sinclair ruefully.

"Let's go back to this problem of electronics," said the boy. "If we begin by working out the circuit along these lines——" he pointed to the diagram, and Brogan leaned forward and studied the intricate mass of lines with keen interest. Most of them meant practically nothing to him, even though he was an electronics expert *par excellence* himself.

"Let us begin here by considering the modifications which will have to be made to our electronic tubes, in the actual computer which I propose building," said the boy. "Let us assume that this point here is the cathode. This point beside it is the anode... you follow me there, Professor?"

"Yes, of course," said Brogan.

"Now, here I shall require a filter capacitor, and here will be the resister. To the right the heater, the source of alternating voltage will be along this line here."

"I am still with you," said Brogan triumphantly.

"Well done," smiled the nine-year-old. "Now, this next diagram I have attempted to show the internal parts and the schematic amplifier circuit, the thermionic triode."

"I'm familiar with that, too," said Brogan.

"I know you are," said the lad. "I'm getting most of my information from your memory track. Now let's go on to the theory behind the emission of electrons and just examine the well-known formula. If i⅛=at ²E to the EW ÷ KT then it must also equal at ²E—11,600W ÷ T

It is necessary here to bring in the Naperian logarithms and to remember that the sign K represents Boltzman's Constant——"

"Which is." said Brogan, "1.38 × 10—23 watt secs. Per degrees K."

"Good," said the boy. "Now we're getting somewhere. Then here we must take into account that, since the energy needed to extract an electron is of a very high order, it is clear that no electrons can be emitted if light is a frequency less than VO. That gives us the theory HVO = EW. And if the light quanta of energy are greater than this, RVE, if V exceeds VO, an excess of energy is available to each emitted electron so that it may be emitted with an energy as high as ½MV²=HVO—EW Watt secs."

Brogan was beginning to struggle with the formula.

"Now the modifications I suggest are here, a stepping-up of the constant and the addition of three imponderable variants, which I propose to call 'O'Jordon's Constant' and 'O'Jordon's Variant,' respectively. You will have to allow me to introduce two new symbols, otherwise I'm afraid I can't explain the mathematics of it at all, and you'll just have to take my word for it altogether..."

"I'm prepared to do that, after the demonstration of your intelligence that you have already given us," said Brogan.

The boy's lips pursed as he scribbled on a pad, and his strangely youthful face creased into a frown of mature concentration. It was uncanny to see the face of a child taking on such an adult look.

There was something weird, almost frightening, about the boy. Something so strange and incalculable that, watching him, the three men felt their blood run cold. Colrayn was not by any means a squeamish man—there is no such thing as a squeamish sanitary

inspector—a man doesn't take on that job unless he has a constitution like an ox. Yet, Colrayn felt icy shivers running up and down his back as he looked at Ricky O'Jordon. It was weird, frightening, bizarre, to see a nine-year-old child rattling off mathematical formulae so complex that he had had to innovate entirely new symbolism in order to make the necessary equation for the fantastically compound work upon which he was engaged.

About ten minute later he looked up and the creased concentration had been replaced by a smile.

"It can be done," he said triumphantly, "Yes, gentlemen, it definitely can be done." He paused and his face took on yet another expression. An expression which the three men were coming rapidly to associate with those moments when he probed their minds, filching information from their memory tracks. They knew that all their experience, all the data that they had accumulated in their lives was as available to the boy as books in a library. More so, for he seemed able to assimilate vast quantities of information simultaneously.

"We are working with the national security forces, of course," he said quietly, after he had been expropriating facts from their memories and from their experiences. It was Edward Sinclair, the private investigator, who nodded first. "Now under cover of the usual security networks, which I have just been learning about from your mind, Mr. Sinclair," said Ricky O'Jordon, "I shall require a team of physicists and technicians, but, it occurs to me, and I am sure you will agree, it would be advisable if even the security forces knew nothing of my actual intelligence, so we will put up a blind—a front—a security network, within a security network. We will be the Inner Four, not the Triumvirate, perhaps, but the Triumvirate plus one."

"Triumvirate plus far more than one—if you're the 'one'," answered Sinclair.

At every fresh expression and example of the boy's intelligence, even the investigator was amazed. He thought he had seen the lot, but this 'miracle boy' shook him rigid.

"Professor Brogan, you'd better be in charge of technical development," he said.

"Anything you say, Ricky," nodded the Professor.

"And I think you had better explain my presence in the laboratory by saying that you are conducting some experiments to see whether the radio activity has had any effect on me. You can say I have been mildly affected by the beavers. We'll work that out in more detail later. It won't have to be very convincing. You can just sit me down at a table playing with some little coloured building bricks and I can telepath my instructions to you. Let's just go through these formulae and see if I can simplify them a bit..." He jotted down symbols, explaining and expounding the strange mass of mathematical symbols. Even Brogan's gigantic mind was reeling as he finished.

"And you really think that circuit will be successful?"

"I don't think, I know," said O'Jordon, with complete confidence. "But it must be built exactly according to my specifications. There must be no slip-ups, none at all. You notice here that the two feed-back circuits are unavoidable. Now a fault in either of those lines could result in the most serious consequences."

"Yes, even I appreciate that," said Brogan, "and I wonder how I'm going to explain it away to High Command, if I blow up six of their best technicians on a computer that isn't really my responsibility."

"This is more than a computer. It's a computer combined with a trajectory-ray," said the boy. "It will emit a high-velocity wavicle which will retrogress from its bi-axual co-ordinate forming a spherical force field, the size of which can be varied by the thermionic amplifier valves which are controlled from these two points A and B on the resister input.

Brogan was still ploughing along painfully behind him.

"Fair enough," he said.

"Personally, I'm game," said Sinclair, "I think it's going to be the best way. We have no time to lose. Look what we're up against."

They all thought silently about the beavers for a second or two.

"All right," said Brogan, "I'll stick my neck out. You know, if anybody had ever told me some years ago that a nine-year-old child would be capable of producing a feat of mathematical perfection of such magnitude that I could barely follow it—let alone emulate it—I should have sued the bloke for libel and slander and anything else I could think of. I would in fact have thrown the book at him. Now, here I am, gaily risking my professional reputation on this kid's formulae, and on a computer which is not only so far advanced that I can hardly grasp even the basic outline of the thing, but which, on the admission of its young designer, is very likely to blow up the six best boffins you've got."

Again they regarded each other in thoughtful silence, Brogan lit his pipe, and chewed hard on the stem. It was an outlet for his pent-up feelings.

"Damn and blast!" he said. He looked at Sinclair. "Why the blazes did you get me involved?"

Sinclair turned to Colrayn.

"I might ask you the same question, Barney?" he said. "Why did you get me involved? Why did I get hold of Brogan? Why did this whole crazy chain of circumstances get into motion? Why did we get linked up in it?"

"How do we get involved in anything?" countered Colrayn. "I am sometimes tempted to become a complete and absolute fatalist. Not only a fatalist, but a cynic. I am rapidly reaching the stage where I am prepared to say 'If things will happen, let 'em'. If my name is on those beavers' claws then they'll get me. If it's not—then I shall live to draw me old age pension. Life is as simple as that. As simple and yet as complicated."

"How soon do you think you can get this team down here?" asked the boy curtly.

"Oh, I should think in a matter of twelve to fourteen hours."

"Pity about the time delay," murmured the boy, "because I've been prognosticating—at least a process I call prognosticating—after

searching your vocabularies."

"Do you mean forecasting?"

"Well, it's rather more scientific than 'forecasting'. I have a method in one of my own mathematical systems of working out all the probabilities that may become realities. By a process of deduction, I can decide which are the most likely of the probabilities to become fact. You can call it looking into the future if you like, but it's much simpler than that, it's just a matter of getting all the information you can and then knocking off the impossibles, the improbables, and leaving yourself only with the possibles, and the imponderables..."

"Quite," murmured Brogan politely, having again been left behind.

"Where are my technicians, then! Come on! Come on! Come on!"

"Hark who's giving orders," said Eddy Sinclair. "I wish I'd left you for the beavers to chew."

The boy smiled.

"You don't wish that really, do you?"

"No, I suppose I don't," answered Sinclair, "but it might have made life a lot simpler all round."

"If you'd rather be a sub-species on the world in which radio-active beavers are the dominant race—put me back," said O'Jordon.

That time it was the security man's turn to grin.

Brogan picked up the phone.

"I want the Home Secretary and the Commander in Chief of the General Staff. Top security. Put it through the usual coded channels, please."

He could almost hear the hum of excited voices in the little exchange as the necessary action was taken by the telegraphic and telephone authorities, to see that his instructions were complied with in every respect.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
Testing Ground

THE beavers had not confined their activities to isolated attacks. It was obvious that at first their strange powers had been experimental so far as they were concerned, but it was becoming all too clear, and frighteningly obvious, that they were savagely hostile. It seemed almost as though man had held the upper hand over the animal kingdom for too long, and his rule had been tyrannous and savage. Now the animals—or at least some new, non—human lifeform—in the shape of gigantic radio-active, intelligent beavers, was striking back. In a matter of days the world had been thrown into a state of chaotic panic. No one knew where the giants were going to turn next, and they dealt out dreadful death in many horrible ways.

An enormous paw or tail, imbued and endowed with terrible strength, could rip through masonry and timber as though it didn't exist. And then there were the teeth. The dreadful, rodent teeth! Sharp as chisels! Strong as steel bars. Terrifying things, but worse was the impregnability of the beavers.

Their impregnability was due to their almost unbelievable mobility. No matter what defensive precautions were taken, the beavers were not there.

They would do their damage, then knowing telepathically that a shot was about to be loosed off, for the gunner's mind had to pass the signal to his hand to fire, the beaver would simply teleport itself elsewhere. By the time the shell had landed it would simply rip through the place where the beaver had stood a few seconds previously and as the Irishman would have said, 'There it was—gone!'

It was a cowardly warfare that they conducted. A savage warfare of hit-and-run, and there was no discrimination in their target. A lonely cottage here—a large department store or supermarket there.

The whole country was in a state of emergency.

The armed forces were mobilised, the Navy was on patrol, the Royal Air Force flew overhead. The Terriers, Civil Defence, the Police, and all branches of the military were in full scale operation. But with this sort of enemy, what chance was there...?

The one hope lay with the security forces. And the security forces were depending on Brogan and a miracle boy.

The boffins and technicians had been sent over quickly. They had arrived within eight hours of Brogan's Top Priority message, and they were working day and night. Working with the speed of desperation, for beavers were threatening civilization itself.

The teeth, claws, radio-activity, teleportation, and perhaps, most dreadful of all, the telekinesis... Their brains were large and their brains were strange. They would flash to some vital spot—some important centre of communications—a bridge, a railway junction, an arterial road, and then at a crucial moment, as a convoy of lorries crossed the bridge, or a train thundered along the track towards its points, as steamers and warships made their way through crowded rivers and seas, there would suddenly appear one of the fleetingly fast beavers, use its deadly mind to 'will' either a tidal wave, or the collapse of a bridge, a failure of points, the collapse of a road section, and there would be chaos, catastrophe, and disaster. Like the secret police of George Orwell's "1984," the beavers were literally everywhere. There seemed no limit to the distance which they could teleport, although they had actually to be on the spot, in visible sight of their victims, before they could use their telekinesis. It was frightening, terrifying. Humanity was fighting a war with gigantic, radio-active teleports and telekinetics. It was like fighting deadly ghosts, or strange elemental spirits.

Calm, cool, collective brains, led by the hidden genius of Ricky O'Jordon, were working behind steel and concrete and barbed wire. Already the first signs were beginning to show, the first prototypes of the transmitter were achieving results.

Brogan went over the machine inch by inch, piece by piece, while Ricky sat toying with his bricks, and directing operations

secretly, through Brogan's mind. The gigantic scientist found himself understanding more and more of the complex project upon which he was engaged. The boy was 'willing' part of his own superb intelligence into Brogan's mind, as though he was stepping up his own I.Q. And the scientist began to understand enough of what he was doing to accelerate the results. At last the great moment came.

"We're ready for test-out," flashed O'Jordon's thought to Brogan, and Brogan passed the command on to his team of boffins and technicians.

The machine itself was a fantastically complicated tangle of wires and valves, pistons, levers, relays, switches, insulators, electrodes, anodes, cathodes, and a hundred-and-one other peculiar devices, which were largely a pure brilliant invention of the miracle boy. They were attempting a practically impossible feat. They were attempting to reproduce a mechanised version of a mutated brain. They were attempting to reproduce an electronic teleportation device, equipped with telekinesis, and at the same time capable of throwing out a teleportation and telekinetic jamming beam. The thing filled an area of ten or twelve cubic yards. It looked like a cross between the engine of an atomic submarine and an electronic brain, and the interior of two or three hundred Swiss watches magnified and geared together.

The boffins who had worked on it had no real idea of what they were doing. They had followed Brogan's instructions blindly with almost breathless admiration. Very often a cynical smile flitted across the bearded scientist's lips, as he wondered what their reaction would have been if they had known the frightening, staggering truth, that he who was hailed as a genius by these able technicians was taking his orders from a nine-year-old boy in a corner of the establishment.

They worked and worked until it was time to put the last finishing touches to it. They were screwing up the last bolt, hammering in the last chassis rivet, when that message flashed across from the boy to the professor, and Brogan spoke the seemingly magic words to his team.

"We are ready for test-out!" The phrase rang round and round the machine like a great shout of triumph. "We are ready for test-out," passed from lip to lip, from mouth to mouth. The technicians assembled as though they were about to witness some solemn launching ceremony. Assembled as curious crowds assembled when the first aviators in their string-and-canvas machines flapped uncertainly into the air for a few quavering, wavering feet.

The boy turned to Brogan with a triumphant smile.

"We're ready for them," he said, forgetting himself for an instant. But Brogan had not forgotten; the technicians were staring at the lad in amazement... the lad corrected himself, almost imperceptibly. "We're ready for them—other bricks now, mister." Brogan heaved a sigh of relief. It had covered up adequately. The technicians took no further notice of Ricky...

"Sorry!" He flashed a mental message to the professor, "I'm getting excited I'm afraid, I have human weaknesses after all."

Brogan had no difficulty in receiving silent, telepathic messages from him now. They had been practising for weeks, and as they had practised the beavers had increased in power and in number, and in savagery.

Suddenly, just as Brogan had been about to press the switch that would put the machine into operation, that would send *power* through that electronic colossus, there was a gasp of pain from the boy, and a message sped across the ether, silent and invisible, into Brogan's mind.

"The beavers! They know I am dangerous! I can feel them. They are very close. They are concentrating their minds in me, they are using their telekinetic power against me. They are trying to will me to death."

"Will yourself alive," flashed back Brogan. "You can't let them beat you now, Ricky."

The boy fell to the floor, foaming at the mouth, his eyes rolled wide, his little hands clenched and unclenched. It looked to the assembled technicians as though he were suffering from an epileptic

fit. But Brogan knew these were the outward signs of an inward mental struggle. He knew that a battle of the giants was being fought there in that laboratory. A battle of the mental giants, a battle of the radio-active beavers and the Miracle Boy.

But what would the result be?

They out-numbered him, and their brains were physically bigger at least, and yet, convolutions—it was all a matter of convolutions. The brain of a beaver is a microscopic thing compared to the brain of a man. But the brains of several gigantic beavers—how did they compare with the brain of a nine-year-old boy? If Ricky had had the physical strength of an adult Brogan would not have worried so much. He knew then there was only one thing he could do. The boy was possibly just holding his own and only just... if anything the beavers were winning, winning by strength of numbers. Possibly even now calling up reinforcements. They were going to bring in one more beaver mind. He knew that they were round about, somewhere quite close. They had to be near enough to use their power. It couldn't be used at an excessive range. They had to be within sight and sound of the security emplacements. Why weren't the guards doing something? How the devil had they got near enough to know where Ricky was? Perhaps, thought Brogan, they were picking him up rather as a detector van can pick up a pirate TV receiver. They were tracing him. Flying in on a beam as a pilot would. . ..

He threw the switch into position.

There was a tense electric silence. This was a Moment of Truth.

What was to be done? What was to be done about it? How would the machine react?

Brogan clenched his fists, looking the angry giant that he was, as though he were bent not only upon destroying the beavers but the entire universe. His great hands knotted with muscled whipcord, then he realised that he had an infinitesimal fraction of something the boy had been able to give him. It is the last grain of sand that tips a delicate balance... the boy was just holding his own, perhaps a little assistance would not only scare off the beavers but might

mislead them into thinking that there were more of the telekinetic, teleport humans than there actually were.

If Brogan could only convince them that he was as powerful as the boy...

He began sending his own thought crashing out, blindly like a sightless boxer, with a bleeding gash on his brow, punching out wildly at an opponent he cannot see. He concentrated all his anger into thoughts of pure hatred, and directed it at the beavers. He imagined beavers as dying in all sorts of agonising positions. He pictured them starving, drowning, freezing to death and burning alive. He thought of all the horrible and hideous things that he could imagine, and imagined them all happening to the gigantic beavers. He imagined their brains, shrinking, bursting. He imagined everything conceivably evil that could happen to his enemies and he threw it at them. He willed it to happen.

And the writhing, twisting, groaning boy on the floor began to breathe more easily.

"I'm doing it," thought Brogan. I never thought it would be possible. I've got some of his power and I'm using it."

Then he concentrated on driving them back by a sheer effort of will, as a lion tamer drives back an angry beast that has dared to step back from its pedestal before he bade it do so.

"Back, I bid you, back!" Like King Canute with the angry sea.

Only this time Canute—in the form of Brogan—was winning. This time the sea, in the analogy, was gigantic beaver. It was remaining below its high water mark.

"We're doing," The thought came through from Ricky, garbled and weak, but it was better than no signal at all. And then, as the last of the valves and relays picked up the signal that the switch had thrown into the machine, as the last of that complicated circuit of miles of wire picked up the impulse from the starter, the invisible electromagnetic emulated force field threw itself out. Threw itself out in a great protecting shield, and suddenly Brogan knew that the beavers could no longer reach them. Mentally at any rate.

The boy got up from the floor and wiped the froth from his lips.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I feel better now. I just want a drink of water..."

One of the technicians hurried off to fetch a glass. Ricky O'Jordon flashed a signal to the professor.

"They were on to us. We only got the machine going with seconds to spare. They very nearly killed me. What did you do?"

"Did the only thing I could," flashed back Brogan, "While I was waiting for the machine to warm up and come into operation. I threw out a hate thought at the beavers."

"Yes, I picked up snatches of that. I don't know whether it actually worked physically," telepathed Ricky. "It might have done..."

"How is it we can still telepath with the machine in operation?" signalled Brogan,

"We're within the sphere. If one of us was outside and the other was inside we would be out of touch," signalled the boy. "What we've done is to build an invisible, globular wall between us and them."

"Thank heavens for that," said the professor. And suddenly the lights went out. Brogan got a sudden telepathic impulse of a singularly impolite word, which had slipped involuntarily from Ricky. It was hardly the sort of word one would associate with a nine year old boy. And he realised, even as he thought this, young O'Jordon picked up that thought also.

"I got it out of our own memory track, if you're wondering where I learnt it," he said. "I wondered what it meant for a long time, and then I realised it was just an expletive. I suppose it slipped out, my subconscious had stored it away, and with the knowledge that it was used in moments of stress and strain.

"Well, I'm hanged. This is a two-edged weapon, isn't it. I hope you aren't probing my memory bank too closely, you may find some even grimmer secrets in there." There was a smile in the thought.

But there was no time for smiling. There was no time for badinage.

"Those beavers have got to be stopped."

"I know," flashed back the Professor, "but how?" One of the technicians spoke.

"The power's gone from outside, sir."

"They must have cut the line," signalled Ricky O'Jordon.

"They must have cut the line," said Brogan.

"You mean the beavers, sir?"

"That's right. They realise what we've done and are determined to stop us at all costs. This force field is only the beginning of the weapon that you men have made."

"Without you we couldn't have done anything," answered the technician.

"I couldn't have built this thing myself. I could have done nothing without a team of men.

"That's truer than they think," he flashed to Ricky.

"We've got to get some power going inside the field," signalled the boy. "Tell 'em to get step-up transformers and all the batteries they can find. Car batteries, cycle batteries, anything they can find. Wire the whole lot up in series, quickly!"

Brogan snapped the instructions to his men.

"And hurry! Because any minute now those beavers are going to flash in among us."

He had scarcely got the words out when the room rocked, as a gigantic figure suddenly appeared among them. But fear had reduced the caution of the huge hideous animals. And Brogan was not alone with the technicians and Ricky. Two other men who had been involved in the adventure from the start were in the room with him. One of them had a special aptitude. An aptitude that had kept him alive when many times, by all the laws of chance and average, he should have been well and truly dead. That man was Edward Sinclair...

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
Into Battle!

EDDY SINCLAIR might well have been in the mind of the immortal Bard of Avon when Shakespeare wrote: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances and one man in his time plays many parts ...' and Eddy Sinclair had played more parts than most.

Eddy Sinclair was a man in a million. Eddy Sinclair had one special flair—for keeping alive! He could draw a gun and use it with the speed and accuracy of an old-time Western hero. He could draw faster and shoot straighter than most living men. He would have made Wyatt Earp, Bill Hickock and Bill Cody seem slow by comparison, and he had a brilliant, new automatic weapon, that made their nineteenth century pistols—fine though they were—seem slow and cumbersome by comparison.

Before the beaver could even send out a destructive thought that would have killed those in the room, Sinclair's gun was blazing. He had loosed off three shots before the beaver even realised where they were coming from, and he had fired three more before the telekinetic power of the beaver had wrenched the gun from his hand... but by this time the great brute was bleeding from half-a-dozen deep and serious wounds. It was staggering as it lurched towards them.

"Will it out of here," flashed the boy to Brogan. "Will it to go. Its own mind is damaged."

They both concentrated every ounce of energy upon the enormous rodent monstrosity. They willed it to disappear. They forced their minds, their nerves, every impulse they had was concentrated on imagining the beaver to be elsewhere. Anywhere else. They willed it to vanish, to melt, to go. To disappear. To travel. And slowly the whole outline shimmered until it looked like the

transparent outing of a beaver painted in thin ochre upon a sheet of illuminated glass.

Then even the ghost image began to fade, and then—there was nothing. Nothing but the smell of cordite, and drops of blood upon the floor. One of the technicians moved forward as though to examine a spot of the mutated rodent's blood.

"Keep him back," flashed Ricky, "that stuff is deadly radio active."

"Back! Don't touch it."

"Why not, sir?"

"Because it's ruddy-well radio active," said Brogan. "That's why not. And don't argue with me when I give you an instruction, lad."

"I'm sorry," said the technician, taken aback, his hurt showing in his voice. "I was only curious."

"You'd have been flaming well dead if you'd stuck your finger into that stuff. It will give you radiation sickness if nothing worse."

The technician bit his lip. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"Put some lead shielding over that stuff. You wouldn't touch a lump of radium with your bare hands would you?"

"Of course not," said the technician.

"Well, that stuff is even more dangerous. Get some lead down there quick, before we all go for a Burton."

They got the shielding over the beaver's blood.

"That's better," said the professor. "As soon as possible we'll get that hosed out. Now, let's get to work on these batteries. Remember we've got no time to lose."

The detective stooped and retrieved the gun that the beaver's thought had torn from his grasp.

"We've learnt one important fact——"

"We've learnt several, but which one had you got in mind, Eddy?"

"That without their telekinesis and teleportation they're extremely vulnerable. That thing stopped six shots from a .45-mind

you, it's a very good .45 and a very powerful .45. At the same time it's only a small weapon compared to the things we could hit with."

"I wonder——" flashed Ricky Jordan. "Why didn't they use their telekinetic powers to deflect the bullets? They needn't have let them hit... look, aim at that beam up there. You see the knot hole?"

Torches had been brought from all over the project, and already the darkness in the cellar had gone.

"Aim at that knot hole, and I'll deflect your bullet two feet away from it. Fire when you like."

The detective fired, and the bullet struck the knot hole.

"I wasn't ready," flashed Ricky.

"That's the answer then," said Brogan.

"I understand," said the miracle boy.

The technicians were gaping in amazement.

"You've seen nothing and you've heard nothing," commanded Brogan, scowling. "The radio activity has unhinged the lad's mind a bit..."

"How very complimentary," flashed Ricky.

The technicians seemed satisfied with the answer, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the subterfuge.

"It is the speed with which you fire that gun, the average gunner sees his target, aims, and then thinks about firing. You fire almost without thinking. It's pure instinct with you, and it doesn't go through those conscious processes of mind which they are able to pick up on a telepathic reception. He had no warning at all until he heard the bang, and before he could do anything about it, the next one had struck him and so on. When he found out where the bullets were coming from, he managed to strike the gun from your hand. You are one of our most important weapons," signalled the boy. "We are like a composite gestalt organism."

"What the devil's that?" flashed back Sinclair.

"Well, a gestalt organism is more than one creature working as a unity. There is a school of psychology known as the 'gestalt

School'. It teaches that we experience things in pattern. For example, when you hold your hand under a shower, you feel a sensation as of drops of water striking your hand as a pattern, not singly. We are a gestalt organism, the professor is the voice, the intermediary between me and my men. You are the muscle if you like, I am the mind."

"I see your parallel," telepathed back Eddy Sinclair.

"You had better get that gun reloaded, there is no knowing when these devils will be back," signalled O'Jordon. The detective inserted a new clip.

Meanwhile the technicians had not been idle. It was a clumsy hotch-potch of miscellaneous batteries, of varying voltages and sizes, but a man does not become a Government technician for nothing. If he is a back-room technician then he really is a technician and he knows his stuff. If his speciality is electricity, then he can do things with electricity that very few other people can do. The hotch-potch of batteries was connected. Step-up transformers and step-down transformers and, finally, the correct wattage and voltage was arrived at,

"It's going to hold for about twenty-five minutes," signalled Rick, who had been watching the wiring-up process, and making calculations. He had barely finished expressing the thought when the technician who had made the final connection that brought the lights and machine back into action, spoke quietly to Professor Brogan in a rather worried tone.

"It's going to last between twenty minutes and half-an-hour, sir —certainly not more than half-an-hour."

"I had got it worked out," said Brogan. "We've got to get those main power lines going again, we've got to get a dynamo down here."

"Yes, we should have installed our own generator at the start," said the technician, "it was a great mistake. We must have the source of supply within the force field sir, that's obvious,"

"Yes, it was a mistake—a nearly fatal mistake, if it hadn't been for Mr. Sinclair's prowess with that gun of his." He turned to Sinclair, "I didn't even know you were carrying a gun at the moment, Eddy."

"Never go anywhere without it," said Eddy, "one of these days, if we ever get out of this mess—and the earth gets back to its normal routine of saints and sinners vying with one another for supremacy, and if ever I go back to my ordinary routine of catching the criminal—and breaking up the racket of the common or garden racketeer, then I need the gun as much as I needed it tonight. In the past when I have been engaged in routine criminology, that gun, and the way I could haul it out of a pocket and press the trigger, has been the thin blue steel border line between me and the grave. I remember once when I was in Chicago——" he broke off his reminiscences. "But that's a long story, Brogan, my friend, and I can't go into it here. Its culmination was when I shot three men in under a second. And the third man had his finger less than an inch from the firing button... of a sub-machine gun. It was pointing straight at my head. I never had time to aim, and it was all of fifteen yards away. If that slug had gone quarter of an inch left, right or sideways, he'd have cut me to ribbons, but there you are—only the good die young, they say. Thank goodness there aren't many 'good' people in the world, or it would be a very difficult place to live in."

"You must anticipate living to well over a thousand," said Brogan with an uncomplimentary laugh. "Now, if they haven't smashed down the phone lines we'll see what we can do about getting some generating equipment in here."

"If they have got the phone lines down we'll have to see what we can do about commandeering some," said the detective.

The phone lines were down! They were as dead as the electricity power cables.

Brogan looked at Sinclair. Sinclair looked at Colrayn.

"We're going to have to do some commandeering then," he said, "come on, let's move."

They got out of the bunker and piled into the detective's car.

"We're on the wrong side of the forcefield now," said the professor, "and we haven't got the miracle boy with us to put those beavers back into their dens... If they suddenly spring up in the middle of the road and decide to turn this car over, even your gun may not save us."

"You're sure that field is going to hold?" asked Sinclair. "They aren't going to nip in there and get the kid while we're out here finding a new generator?"

"Not a hope, though that's what they're after."

"You can say that again," said Colrayn. "He's the danger man as far as they're concerned."

"Danger *Boy*," corrected Brogan. "Don't forget, Mr. Colrayn, sir, that I'm a stickler for accuracy."

Colrayn grinned at the mock pomposity in Brogan's voice. Anyone less pompous than Brogan it would have been difficult to meet. But it was one of his personas. He liked to imagine himself as a Conan Doyle Professor Challenger. And he usually managed to impinge the character image of himself upon his audience. He was a man of magnetic personality. He had become something like his literary hero in many ways. But he was far from being the aggressive bombast that Challenger was, in several ways. Powerful Brogan was, and tall. But he didn't roar and rave and bully for the sake of it. He had a very forceful personality that only became aggressive when he was goaded into rapid action.

"There's a farmhouse over there," said Colrayn. "I've been there to inspect their infernal drains in the past. I wonder if there's anybody in there, or if they've evacuated it, owing to the danger region.

"That's a laugh," said Brogan. "With the power these things have got they could disappear, and pop up again in the Kyles of Bute, or Land's End, or Anglesey."

"Yes, they certainly could," agreed the professor, "but let's not waste time in speculation. We want to know if the tenants are still in residence, and in either case the most important point to which we

have to find an answer is whether they have an electric generating plant. Whether there is fuel, and whether it is sufficiently mobile for us to get it back to H.Q., before those blinkin' batteries reach their limit of twenty-five minutes. How long have we been gone?"

"Bout four-and-a-half minutes," said the detective.

"That leaves us just over twenty then, and that's without any time for fitting the damn thing up, and replacing the batteries. Come on, let's move."

The powerful car lurched, rattled and bumped over the farm drive. The buildings were empty. The worthy agriculturalist had obviously decided that discretion was the better part of valour in the present instance. There was, however, a petrol generating plant and two full five-gallon cans in the cellar beside it. It was a big plant and heavy.

"We'll never get. that into the car, not in time anyway," said Brogan looking at it dismally.

"No, we shall have to split it into three sections. No time for unbolting, we shall just have to crack that steel casing. If we smash through here and here where it is cast, we could wire it up temporarily, it doesn't matter about being riveted together."

"That's true," said Brogan.

"I spotted a lorry outside, do you think we can do it?"

"It will be a race against the clock, but we must try. There was a sledge hammer lying outside in a shed." He came back with that and an axe.

"Don't smash any of the vital parts," said Brogan. For a full five minutes they worked like Titans, crashing at the steel casing, sending rivets and chips of steel and bits of axe and sledge hammer flying all over the room. Finally the heavy generating plant was loose on its moorings. Two more strokes from the giant and the sledge hammer got it loose. It was then, and only then, that Sinclair, a fantastically strong man himself, realised just how tough Brogan was. The sections weighed at least five or six hundredweight. Brogan picked one up on his own. Colrayn just stood and gasped.

"Don't stand there admiring me," gritted the professor through clenched teeth. "You and that comical detective of yours, pick that other one up and get it outside on to that truck."

Heaving and straining they got the first two sections out of the cellar and on to the back of the lorry. As Sinclair and Colrayn leaned for a moment against the lorry to get back their wind, the gigantic scientist was puffing and panting back towards the cellar to pick up the third section.

They met him half way and grabbed the other end. "I wondered when you lazy beggars were going to do something," grated Brogan. "Let's see if the goddam truck will start." They got the engine roaring to life and spotted a puncture.

"We'll have to run with the thing flat, that's all," bellowed Brogan.

It was a nightmare journey, lurching, swaying, bumping, jerking from side to side.

On several occasions they thought the truck was going over. They thought they were going to lose the vital cargo.

They thought a gigantic beaver, or a whole cluster of gigantic beavers—radio-active beavers—would appear. But there was nothing…

With five minutes to spare before the batteries ran out they rolled and rattled into the steel, concrete and barbed wire bunker.

"Made it this far, at any rate," said Brogan. "Now let's see how fast we can get this flaming thing reassembled." Shouting for his technicians to come to their assistance, he began hauling the sections of the generator off the truck.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
Of Beavers and Men

"The best laid plans of beavers and men
Sae often gang agley"

JASPER LEROY was thinking. That in itself was nothing unusual, but it was the trends of Leroy's thoughts rather than their actual existence which were the cause for comment. He was thinking about something other than profit—just for once.

He was thinking about the way in which he had always polluted Nature. How he had always poured oil on his rivers, and pollution into his rivers. He was thinking of the dust and the smoke which belched up into the air. He was counting the cost of his profit in dust, and waste, and anti-social pollution, and he was thinking philosophically.

Life, he decided was an equitable process. It has a habit of paying dividends according to man's investment. He remembered hearing or reading somewhere, that what a man sowed—or what a nation sowed—that should they reap. What had he sowed, he asked himself... Corruption. Corruption with a capital 'C'.

He had sowed it in the water till there was scarcely room for the water to hold any more. He knew that fish had died of the poison. 'So what?' he had asked himself. No- body had suffered—nobody except the fish. Yet something that lay dying in a muffled recess, something that might once have been his conscience, kept trying to tell him that fish had feelings too. That they were living creatures, and that they had a right to live. He thought of the fish that had died of the poison. He thought of the filthy, turgid, sluggish, black water where nothing lived except mud... water rats... and those accursed beavers. Those beavers which had proved so incredibly hardy. They had not been killed by the poison, they had managed to adapt and adjust themselves. Until they were able to live *with it.* Then it hadn't only been poison that his factories had

belched out. It had been radio-active waste. Radio-activity had been swirled into the dark waters. By whom? And for what? By him. By Jasper Leroy. He was responsible. The guilt was his.

And the beavers that had not died by poison had not died by radio-activity either. They seemed to be the ultimate in adaptives. And that power of adaptation which they possessed had had a strange and hideous consequence.

Slowly at first and then more rapidly as the level of radio activity increased, and as generation succeeded generation, the beavers had begun to change. More generations of rodents had bred, and those generations had mutated as they bred. And why? And how? Because of the influence of the toxins which he had poured into the water? Because of the radio-active waste with which he had fouled and polluted the rivers?

It was in an agony of mind that he forced himself to admit that Colrayn had been right. That the authority which employed Colrayn had been right. And that now there was a Day of Reckoning. A Day of Reckoning that had started several months ago.

The things had emerged, and they were thirsting for vengeance. Man's mastery of the world was threatened. And why? Because men like Jasper Leroy had gone on polluting waste... a hundred Jasper Leroys... a thousand Jasper Leroys. A million Jasper Leroys had gone on pouring effluence, factory waste, into water. He thought how pure and clear water could be at its best.

He had watched the gleaming headlines in the papers. He had sat glued to his television set as it told of fresh beaver outrages, and he knew that on his head, and on the heads of hundreds like him, rested the guilt.

It was just bad luck that it was his river from which the beavers had emerged. The river in which Jasper Leroy's radio-active mess had started such terrible things.

"What have I done?" he asked himself. Then the other side of his character asserted itself.

"Damn it all! I'm Jasper Leroy the industrialist. I have a right to do what I like! I have a right to make a profit. It's a free world. If I wish to use radio-active isotopes in my manufacturing processes, then I have a perfect right to jettison my waste in the most convenient and economical way. I am beholden to none. I am responsible to none."

The two sides of his character vied with one another, striving for upper place... and suddenly his thoughts were interrupted. There was a crash as the wall of his office shattered and broke. For a moment he staggered back, blinded by falling masonry He could see nothing but the dust. He could hear nothing but the rumbling roar of destruction.

Then he saw something else—something huge, silky grey and red-brown. Something with an enormous tail. Something as big as a haystack that was quietly pulling his building to pieces.

Then he saw a great head, and powerful, terrible teeth. It was one of the radio-active beavers.

"Oh, no! No! No!" gasped Jasper Leroy, and even as he spoke he knew his Day of Reckoning was at hand. The thing he had created had come for him. He backed away, screaming madly, as inch by inch the radio-active beaver drew closer and closer. A huge radio-active paw stretched out and touched him, and he knew that even if he was not bitten or gashed he was a dead man.

That grey silky paw was the Touch of Death.

He looked at the eyes in the gigantic head, and saw there reflected his own terrified face, drawn and distorted as the face of a man is distorted when he looks into the rippling surface of a polluted river.

He saw Nemesis, radio active Nemesis. He choked, gasped and sank back into his chair, looking through the wrecked wall of his office.

The beaver disappeared as suddenly as it had come. As he sat staring into space the radio in the office suddenly interrupted its soft dance music for an important announcement.

"Professor Brogan and his team of scientists have perfected an answer to the problem of the radio-active beavers. Stand by for an important announcement. We are in direct radio contact now with Professor Brogan..."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
Armageddon

"So all day long the noise of battle rolled." (Tennyson).

IN THE great steel, concrete, barbed wire bunker, desperate, overtired, overworked men were flogging the last ounce of endurance and strength out of bodies that were screaming for sleep.

They worked because Brogan would not let them sleep. He needed from them a superb effort. They had to get the machinery going. Gradually the thing began to take shape as Brogan shouted and raved to keep them going.

"At last," he thundered, when all was done, and the bellow went out of his voice as he heard the hum of the machine. "Do you know what you've done?" he said. There was a mixture of joy and pride and overwhelming relief as he slapped his exhausted technicians on the back. The men embraced each other, and shouted and laughed with relief.

"We've won! That's what we've done! We've won! WON!"

"Not quite," said the miracle boy suddenly. When they looked at him he was playing with the bricks again. "Not quite got them in the right places..."

He was telepathing to Brogan.

"Stop counting your chickens before they're hatched. You've got the force field up, but what's the good of a defensive war? We can't *win* by defence. We've got to win by attack."

"You're right," flashed back Brogan as he continued slapping his technicians on the back. "What do we do now?"

"Get on those three converter beams. We've got to see if we can nullify the animals themselves."

"I'll get the beams working," signalled Brogan.

"All right, lads. Tea break for five minutes, but don't go to sleep in the teapot."

There were grins, real, friendly spontaneous grins. A great sense of relief was everywhere. As long as that generator ran they knew that no beaver could approach and they could work without the fear that a huge, hirsute form would suddenly appear, breathing out radio-active death and destruction.

They worked all the better for the tea-break.

"This is what we do, lads," said Brogan when the last cup was set back on the tray. He began pointing out adjustments on the circuit of one of the auxiliary phases of the machine. And all the time the miracle boy was telling him how to put theory into fact.

An hour later all was ready.

"All we need now are beavers so we can try the machine out," said Brogan. The boy looked at him.

"It's not likely they'll come and sit on our doorstep waiting for us to try our new weapon on them, is it? Especially after we killed one of them... *You'll have*

to try it on me…"

Brogan looked at him aghast. "You don't know what you're saying," he blurted.

"*Perhaps...*" mused the miracle boy, enigmatically.

"O.K. then," said Brogan. "If you're really sure that's the way you want it."

"There will be three possible results," whispered the boy, softly. "First, death; secondly, a temporary loss of power, enduring while the machine is functioning."

"I don't like the idea at all," interrupted Eddie Sinclair.

"If he's set on it, there's very little we can do to change his mind," said Brogan, in a resigned voice.

Slowly and carefully the gigantic scientist began adjusting the dials of the machine. Peculiar things happened to the circuits, strange humming sounds ensued.

Fields of incalculable power enveloped the boy. This time the machine was not acting as a mere shield-projector; this time the electronic masterpiece was on the

attack...

The miracle boy gave a shrill cry of pain and clapped his hand to his brow.

"We've killed him!" gasped Brogan, in an agony of remorse.

"No. He's still breathing," whispered Colrayn, as he stooped over the prostrate form. Brogan lifted the child in his massive arms. "He's going to be O.K.," he announced as he felt a pulse.

The boy opened his eyes.

"Where am I?" he asked in bewilderment. "What's happened? Who are you? What's that funny thing?" He pointed to the great electronic machine, which his genius had built. His voice lacked the self assurance that it had possessed during the last few hours. It was the ingenuous pipe of a nine year old. The vocabulary too had returned to normal.

"*The third possibility,*" said Brogan. "The machine has undone the effects of the radiation. He is no longer a genius. He is a normal nine year old again."

"Sinclair," said Barney. "I've been thinking. *I believe he did it on purpose*. He wanted to be normal again. He did what he had to do."

"Now then!" exclaimed Brogan. "That must be it." He stroked his great beard thoughtfully. "The boy built the machine for us, saved humanity from the menace of the radio-active beavers, then decided that he didn't want to be alone on his pedestal of super genius."

"He must have known," broke in Sinclair, "that the machine would neutralise the strange brain powers which the radio-activity had produced. I'm not really sorry though, it would have been a horrible thought to realise that there was a nine-year-old child walking around with a brain powerful enough to destroy the universe."

THE END

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